KOYOMIMONOGATARI

CALENDAR TALE PART 02

NISIOISIN

TRANSLATED BY
DANIEL JOSEPH

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PART 02

NISIOISIN

VERTICAL.

[RAGDOLL]

KOYOMIMONOGATARI
Calendar Tale

Part 02

NISIOISIN

Art by VOFAN

Translated by Daniel Joseph

VERTICAL.

KOYOMIMONOGATARI, PART 02

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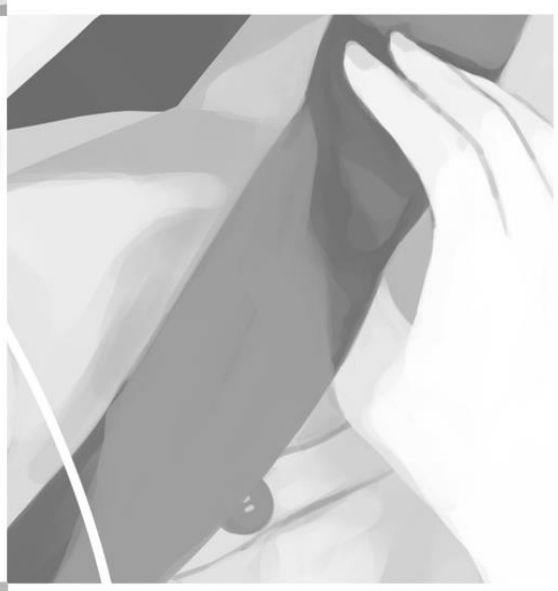
CHP SEVEN

KOYOMI
TEA

CHP EIGHT

KOYOMI
MOUNTAIN



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TORUS

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NOTHING

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CHAPTER SEVEN
KOYOMI TEA

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October

Tsukihi Araragi, the younger of my two little sisters, doesn't really give the impression of someone walking down a road–but when I say that, I'm not trying to evoke some cool sense of treading a path that is not a path or blazing new trails in life. How can I put this? It seems like she forges ahead lightly, airily, as if she's flying.

That's just my personal view as her big brother.

I wouldn't go so far as to call it a viewpoint.

Though I bet almost everyone who knows her thinks of her as being hard to pin down–as she floats about like a bird.

Hard to pin down, hard to figure out.

Everyone knows that birds can fly–but the fascinating thing is, apparently they were equipped with the capacity to fly even before they flew. They call that preadaptation.

Without the capacity they could never have flown, so it stands to reason. Still, it's strange when you think about it. Before birds branched off from reptiles, before they flew, they were already prepared to fly.

When you get right down to it, isn't that more like a dormant ability than evolution? Knowing that they'd soar through the skies someday, they steadily prepared themselves–evolution is supposed to be a process of natural selection via adapting to circumstance, but they foresaw the potential circumstance and adapted to it in advance.

That sort of canny shrewdness does remind me of my little sister. She may not have her feet planted firmly on the ground, but that only contributes to her birdlike quality.

Asking someone like her might be pointless, but I asked her anyway.

Tsukihi, how do you see the path you tread–even if her road isn't contiguous with the ground, the skies must have pathways too.

They must have tracks.

Even airplanes follow fixed courses at fixed times, traveling along predetermined flight paths–taking into consideration air resistance and the direction of the wind. So even Tsukihi, floating along like a cloud, had to have a path, or the concept of a path, that served as her compass, that she took to be her compass.

Hence my question.

However.

"There're no paths in the sky, big brother," answered Tsukihi. "Even if there were, I'd ignore them. I just can't do things the way they're supposed to be done."

My little sister was even more of a risk than I'd imagined.

If she was dead set on being a bird, not an airplane, then getting sucked into the engine of a jet and causing a major accident almost seemed like a certainty.

"Welcome home, big brother!"

"Hi, Tsukihi."

"Back early, huh? I've got goodies, you want some?"

"Goodies? Yeah, I'd love some."

"I've got tea, too."

"Well, aren't you thoughtful."

"I've got something I need to talk to you about, too."

"I'll have some of that as well…hey."

And so I was cajoled into listening to what Tsukihi had to say. Such a fluid delivery, truly a rare bird of a strategist–though this time I'd left myself wide open.

Always a mistake to be too amiable with my sister.

In any event, my defenses were down because I'd just gotten home from school, and Tsukihi ambushed me, one day in October.

Enjoying the tea and cakes she'd set out in our living room, I found myself lending an ear to her, like with Karen the previous month. Both of my little sisters were starting to communicate with me like they'd used to, which was in itself a welcome turn of events, and I'd be lying if I said it didn't make me happy, but it was also getting in the way of my exam prep.

Well.

It was hard to imagine that Tsukihi's issue would be as sensitive as Karen's and something I'd want to help out with. As far as I could tell, Karen was the driving force behind the Fire Sisters' game of defenders of justice, and Tsukihi was just along for the ride–I was pretty sure her problem was asinine.

No doubt we'd have it sorted out before the tea and cakes were even finished–the cakes were the real deal, she must've brought them home from the school tea ceremony club's supply.

Wondering if they could be lumped under the general heading of "sweets," I nonetheless ignored etiquette and started grabbing them and popping them into my mouth.

I say ignored, but damned if I know the proper etiquette.

"Okay, dear brother. My dear, dear brotherother."

"Keep it simple, stupid."

"I'm doubling the respect I'm showing you. So, about this thing."

“Keep it brief. I’ll stay as long as these delightful cakes hold out. Now, can you put your big brother to good use?”

“Do you believe in ghosts?”

“Ghosts?”

If I have to say, I generally don’t. They’re just an excuse to disappear some donuts.

“Why, did you hear something from Sengoku?” I probed, not sure how candid I should be with my little sister.

Given her information network, keeping tabs on the happenings in this town over the past six months, regarding that swindler or anything else, wasn’t all that hard. But how much of it would she swallow even if she found out about it?

The thing is, though in a different way than Karen, Tsukihi too is a realist–however birdlike, she wouldn’t be gulled into believing in “charms” and what have you so easily.

“What does Nadeko have to do with anything? Sometimes I have no idea what you’re on about, big brother.”

Indeed, she cocked her head in confusion. That was comforting, but to keep her from realizing that it comforted me, I answered her question with a question. “Never mind. Why this sudden talk of ghosts, though? Is there one in the tea room at school or something?”

I had no basis for supposing there was, I was just continuing with the questions to distract her from the Sengoku thing–and simply combining her talk of “ghosts” with the cakes I assumed she’d brought from there.

It just so happened I was right on the money.

Let no one cast aspersions on my hunches. If only I could manifest my penetrating intuition on a scantron sheet–it never seems to work when I fill in the bubbles with wild guesses.

“Exactly, I’m impressed,” confirmed Tsukihi.

“Huh? Exactly, like how?”

My pathetic response made it seem like I couldn’t even remember what I’d just said. What a birdbrain, a fitting brother for Tsukihi.

Yours truly.

“Like, there’s a ghost in the tearoom–” she said, twisting her pigtails, which she had for a month now, around her finger. I’d advised against the look, but she wasn’t the type to listen to her big brother. “Or actually, there *was* a ghost in the tearoom.”

“Actually?”

Once there’s a ghost involved, we’re miles away from *actual,* but I could check myself a little longer to see where this was going.

“And?” I prompted.

There were still plenty of cakes and tea, so I was ready and willing to stick with her story a little longer. Unlike Karen, Tsukihi was thankfully blessed with at least a modicum of conversational prowess–the act of listening itself was unlikely to be a source of stress.

“I just told you, there was a ghost.”

“When you say ‘there was’…what exactly do you mean? There were signs a ghost had been in the tearoom?”

“Signs, no…I couldn’t tell you there was. There’s no objective proof that *the girl* was there.”

The girl? Oddly specific.

“Tsukihi, let me enlighten you about something. No proof means no ghost. Great, so it’s settled. We’ll use whatever time we have left for a nice chat.”

“Hup!”

Tsukihi launched an attack at me, her older brother. Wielding a three-color retractable ballpoint pen that happened to be sitting on the table–she wasn’t trained in any kind of combat technique, unlike Karen, and so had no compunction about bringing a weapon to a fight.

Just when Senjogahara finally gave up using office supplies as armaments… Tsukihi had a short fuse, but I was starting to suspect she was also the other kind of mad.

Truly terrifying.

To think that one phone call was all it’d take to cart off someone who lived under the same roof… Thankfully, primed by my long years of being her brother, I easily dodged the three-color clicky pen.

I used the boxing technique known as a sway. It’d never be of use to me in the future, and naturally, I want nothing to do with a future where I’d need it to be of use.

“Chat, my ass. I want to talk to you *about* something, not just talk to you.”

“Okay, okay…whoa there. I get it, so stow that pen already.”

“Stow? Which color?”

“All of them. Black, blue, and red, stow ’em all. So? What’s the deal? There was a ghost in the tearoom, but there’s no proof?”

“That’s what I said. Weren’t you listening?”

“You’re the one who’s not listening. No proof means no ghost, doesn’t it.” I didn’t think it bore repeating, but my sagacious little

sister was also stubborn, and maybe I just needed to say the same thing twice. “In fact, let me guess. You proved there was no ghost?”

“Wow. How did you know?”

Tsukihi was floored.

Her reaction was gratifying. Just a touch more and it would’ve seemed contrived, but if I may, my little sister is quite good at discerning where to draw that line.

“Well done, big brother, you’re a genius!”

“I’m no genius, all it took was a little hard work.”

By contrast, I tend to get carried away and step right over it.

Well, in this case, it was less about hard work and more about having accumulated XP as a big brother–I can sort of tell what she’s likely to do.

You never know what she might be getting up to, but at the same time, I know how “you never know what she might be getting up to”–there’s a high degree of randomness to her behavior, but I have some sense of its general orientation.

Thanks to that, I can apply the brakes… Karen’s similar, but the problem with her is that her speed and power are of a different order of magnitude. I can try to stop her, but a “road closed” sign means nothing to her.

She blasts right through any roadblock.

True, Tsukihi might soar right over it–but that’s what nets are for.

I bet the story went something like this:

Whether it was a so-called “school ghost story” or more like “the seven wonders of campus,” rumors had sprung up about a spirit haunting the Tsuganoki Second Middle School tea ceremony club’s

venerable tearoom–and Tsukihi set out to investigate, probably as private citizen Araragi rather than as a member of the Fire Sisters.

And she resolved it.

"Resolved" might be the wrong word when the truth is that there was no "it"–but anyway, she gathered evidence and testimonies, and demonstrated that no spirit haunted the tearoom.

There is no ghost there, she concluded–more or less.

Through plain old intuition, or something sub-intuition, I'd hit upon the notion that a ghost lurked in the tearoom; meanwhile, on my honor as a big brother, the above conjecture must be more or less correct. That would also raise some questions, though.

If I was right, what the hell did Tsukihi want to discuss with me? Wasn't the issue–the case, already closed?

This "girl" doesn't exist–and never did.

That was the punch line.

We could call it a day with a simple: *Nice one, Tsukihi.*

Maybe she wanted me to lavish her with praise?

I'd feel awkward praising my little sister…yet if that was the right epilogue, well, I don't know about in ages past, but these days I had no real objection.

"Well done, Tsukihi, you're a genius!"

"You're missing the point. I've got a problem."

I thought she'd be as pleased as I was if I praised her in the same way, but nope–her face just clouded over.

"What should I do, big brother?"

"Hm? About what?"

“C’mon, like you said–I explained, logically, that there was no ghost… But nobody believes me.”

Everyone.

Believes in the ghost instead–griped Tsukihi, sipping her tea.

There’s a game called Square.

Well, it doesn’t have much entertainment value, or as we’ll see, it’s a group activity that doesn’t pass muster as a game–but it’s famous, so I’m sure everyone will have heard of it, even if I don’t go into it here. That said, it’s kind of my job to go into stuff that everyone must have heard of, so here’s a barebones description.

The field, or scene, is often a cabin on a snow-covered mountain during a blizzard–and the players are four stranded climbers.

The standard fare in that scenario is “Don’t fall asleep, you’ll die if you do!” as they slap your cheek–though there are various theories about whether you’d actually die. Some argue that it’d maintain your strength, and your life, by slowing down your metabolism–but anyway, Square is played under those circumstances, to keep from falling asleep.

Each person goes to stand in a different corner of the room–and the game begins. A goes to where B is standing, and taps B on the shoulder. This signals B to go to where C is standing and tap C on the shoulder. As you might expect, C then goes to where D is standing and taps D on the shoulder. Finally, D goes to tap A on the shoulder, and one circuit, or round, is complete, and we’re back to the beginning.

Circling the room in this fashion, the quartet manage to stay awake until dawn, and that’s that–okay, I’m sure I don’t need to tell you that “that” is not in fact “that.”

You see, when D finally goes to tap A on the shoulder, A isn't there–since at the outset, A went to where B was standing. D just heads to an empty corner, and the game would end right there, hence the lack of entertainment value.

Mysteriously, though, sometimes the game continues through the night without interruption. Or so they say.

For Square to work, you need five people for four corners, so at some point, a "fifth person" gets involved to help the stranded climbers stay awake. When morning finally comes, the survivors realize: *You can't play this game with only four. Who was the fifth person?*

It'd be uncouth of me to sneer that surely someone would've noticed sooner–I mean, however sleepy you are, notice it already–or to opine that if your goal is to kill time and stay awake, surely there are smarter ways. Understood as a ghost story, it's mysterious but not very scary, a kind of feel-good anecdote. After all, the "fifth person" saved the lives of the other four…

Not that Tsukihi played Square in the tearoom with her club-mates. From what I've heard of the kimono fashion show they put on for the culture festival, they seem pretty uninhibited, but I doubt tea ceremony aficionados would run around in circles in their sacred space.

I don't even remember where I first heard about Square, or from whom, but what Tsukihi said reminded me of that rumor of a ghost story.

The "fifth person."

Well, since there were currently seven people in the tea club, the "eighth person"–Eight is Great, as they say, though I don't think that's relevant here.

“Um, so you’re saying there’d been sightings of this ‘eighth person’? And you squashed the rumor?”

“I didn’t squash anything. There wasn’t any ‘eighth person’ to begin with–it was just a rumor that arose spontaneously. The idea that my stronghold was being fingered as the point of origin for such a weird-ass rumor stuck in my craw, so I decided to look into it, big brother.”

“…”

Weird-ass, stuck in my craw–pretty rough choice of words… Talking with her one on one like this, I couldn’t help but think that dealing with Karen, whose personality was super straightforward even if she seemed like the rough one at first glance, was so much easier.

“I’ll spare you the details, but I logically refuted every single account of a sighting and every piece of circumstantial evidence that this rumor about an ‘eighth member’ was based on. Logically.”

“Don’t harp on the logically part. Makes it sound like a lie.”

“Saying that it sounds like a lie makes you sound like an asshole,” Tsukihi puffed out her cheeks. “When you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains is whatever remains when you eliminate the impossible.”

“That’s true, logically speaking, but…”

It also didn’t mean anything, logical or not.

“But whether you were squashing a rumor or investigating it, why the whole brouhaha? People might start spreading rumors about your own behavior. You’ve got a real match-pump approach.”

“Match-pump? Huh? What does that even mean?”

“Um…”

If you haven't put too much thought into it, being asked about your word choice can catch you off guard. In my case, since I don't have a particularly large vocabulary, I occasionally use expressions because I like the way they sound, without really understanding what they mean, which sometimes leads me to realize that I've been using them wrong.

In order to keep a smug look off my sister's face and maintain my dignity as her older brother, I had to give a proper explanation…

"'Match' as in a match you light a fire with. The kind you strike. The 'pump' is like a water pump–so 'match-pump' means you light something on fire and then put it out yourself."

"I understand the pump part, but what's a match?"

"…"

Are matches that obscure? Was it a generational thing?

I explained to her that it's like a lighter.

The mechanism is totally different, of course, but she'd get the general idea.

"Hmm… In other words, like Miss Hanekawa."

"No, in other words like you. Don't criticize Hanekawa."

"I'm not being critical. I'm being supportive, really supportive. I'm a real Hanekawa supporter, and a real me supporter too."

"I'm pretty sure you're the biggest you supporter around…"

"I'm so supportive I'm like Atlas. By match-pump approach, you mean I always take responsibility for my own actions, right?"

"…"

Tsukihi's one hell of a spin doctor, I'll give her that.

She was gonna need a different kind of doctor when I was through with her, though–and dammit, she ended up with a smug look on her face anyway.

If she always took responsibility for her own actions, why come to me for advice like this in the first place?

Wait…

No, Tsukihi's always dumping her difficulties, troubles, and disaster cleanup on me or whoever else, we're always wiping her ass for her, so in that sense she's in no way someone who takes responsibility for herself–but this time was different.

The story was already over.

This rumor of the "eighth member" of the tea ceremony club was already officially disproven thanks to Tsukihi's independent investigation–so the story was over.

The matter had been resolved.

The tale had ended.

She'd taken–full responsibility.

Nevertheless–she needed to talk to me.

"So here's the thing, big brother. The cute, cute, cute li'l sis character Tsukihi–"

"Nah, you're only a little sister character to me and Karen… To everyone else you're just some girl."

"What? I'm a sister to the masses."

"Just how many siblings have you got?"

Terrifying…

I'll never sleep again.

“Well, sure, it’d be scary if they were all like you and Karen. I’m sorry, but can you try and stay on track here, big brother? I’m trying to talk to you about something serious.”

“Hmph.” Her demeanor didn’t exactly exude seriousness, given that her mouth was full of cake. “Fine. And what about this cute, cute, cute li’l sis character?”

“Yeah, so I went to all this trouble to disprove the existence of the ‘eighth person,’ but everyone just says, *Maybe. But who knows.*”

“…”

Who knows.

Ah. Not that their reaction even amounted to a conversation, but the nuance was clear–or rather, it was the non-conversation that bothered Tsukihi.

It was a thorn in her side.

“*You might be right, Tsukihi, logically that makes sense, but then again, maybe there was an ‘eighth person’*–that’s the kind of thing they’re saying! The rumor hasn’t gone away at all!”

Whether the first half was an imitation of someone or just an artist’s rendering, the tone was poignant, and that just made the blast of indignation seem even harsher when she reverted to her usual mode.

Still as peaky as ever.

If even Senjogahara can turn over a new leaf, there’s still hope…

“What do you think, big brother?”

Having surged to her feet in her indignation, she seemed to be over the peak of her peakiness. Cooling down just as quickly, Tsukihi resettled herself on the floor and asked me–

“What should I do?”

“What should you do?”

“What can anyone do in cases like these? How can I put it–I asserted the truth, and everyone got that it was true, so any opposition or argument is already over, but the situation hasn’t changed one bit… The ‘truth’ is meaningless, ineffectual. What do I do then?”

“…”

The “truth” is meaningless.

Unfortunately, that happens all too often–something I’ve tried to drill into the skulls of these self-proclaimed defenders of justice, these merchants of truth. How I’ve grappled with trying to explain to the Fire Sisters (sometimes literally grappling with them) that justice and truth aren’t some kind of magic-bullet trump card that’ll always win over society at large…

Whether or not they ever got the message, in this instance we seemed to be dealing with something different.

Not a clash between two truths.

Nor the impotence of justice.

It was the sense that truth–that reason itself was being treated as if it didn’t matter, and someone like Tsukihi couldn’t stand the airiness.

Though she’s as airy as they come.

“So by way of analogy, can we say–”

“No analogies,” she objected.

“Just let me finish.”

“This is my story, and honestly I’m not wild about getting lumped in with some random anecdote.”

“You think I care?”

“I’m always kind of taken aback by it. Like, after I’ve gone out on a limb to express my individuality, whoever’s listening goes, ‘Yup, yup, happens all the time.’ Maybe, but wouldn’t the mature thing be to let it pass?”

“Yup, yup, happens all the time.”

“Exactly!”

“So by way of analogy–when someone believes in blood-type divination, no amount of logical confutation will accomplish anything,” I submitted, eschewing *who knows* in favor of an *easy there* to mollify Tsukihi’s ire. Even without her complaint, it wasn’t entirely clear that my analogy was a good one, but at least it was simple.

“I don’t know what ‘logical confutation’ means, but yeah, I guess,” Tsukihi conceded. “I’ve actually experienced that exact example. Once, I said to this person, ‘The Japanese are the only ones who believe in blood-type divination,’ only to be told, ‘With that kind of logical mind, you must be Type A!’”

“That’s kind of an extreme example…”

The logical extreme, you might say.

The “charms” the swindler spread around might also fall into that category–you know from the start that something’s a “lie” but believe it anyway. Everyone has those kinds of inconsistencies in their lives to some degree.

It’s not limited to the blood type thing.

For instance, I’ve gone to a shrine on New Year’s Day to pray for health in the coming year–though I have no illusions that throwing a five-hundred-yen coin into the offertory box and pressing my palms together has any bearing on my health.

I’m not devout.

But I do make the pilgrimage–for instance.

“Tsukihi-chan thinks Type B gets the short end of the stick in those personality tests.”

“Don’t call yourself Tsukihi-chan. Are you a toddler?”

“You don’t complain when Nadeko does it… Seriously though, I think there are tons of Type B and AB who’re scarred by that personality test stuff. It really goes to show you how minorities get crapped on.”

“Hunh, interesting.” The whole thing would be a lot less popular if Type A got crapped on, that’s for sure. “What’s it called, labeling theory? Personality classifications according to blood type get drummed into kids from a young age, so they end up growing into the personalities associated with the blood types.”

“Nope, labeling theory is something else. It’s seeing Type A people as embodying what we expect of a Type A personality. We start off knowing that someone is Type A, so they start to seem that way–it’s like we’re slapping them with a letter and not just a label.”

“Hm… But the issue here isn’t whether blood type actually determines anything about you. Most people don’t really believe it, but they get a kick out of fortune telling and personality tests anyway–right? Not that it’s a real issue…”

What it is–is entertainment.

It’s like a game.

In which case, telling someone who enjoys it that *the Japanese are the only ones who believe in fortune telling by blood type* is totally uncool…or depending on how you look at it, harassment.

And it’s not just blood type, it’s probably the same with astrology, palm reading, all that stuff–I have a hard time believing

that people actually base their life decisions on fortune telling the way rulers did in antiquity.

“Yeah. Same as with monsters and ghosts, and UFOs,” Tsukihi said. “As you can see, I’m a rational girl, right? Endowed with an analytical mind and androgynous charms?”

“I’m not so sure about that last part.”

“What does ‘androgynous charm’ even mean… At this point isn’t that kind of an anachronism? Or is it just a question of anatomy? I’m a rational person,” she continued after that digression, “so when I saw everyone losing it over a ghost, I automatically felt like I had to do something to calm everybody down. It seemed like they all wanted me to, and they even cooperated with my investigation, but when I actually came back with an answer, they just smirked at me, or tried not to laugh–or whatever.”

“They didn’t argue and heard you out–but kept right on clamoring about the ‘eighth person’?”

“Bingo,” Tsukihi said discontentedly.

Well, she wasn’t androgynous, and judging from her usual peakiness, she wasn’t too rational either, but I knew her well enough to know that that wouldn’t sit well with her.

It wouldn’t sit well.

That is, she couldn’t sit back and let people completely ignore her endeavor–but mostly, she found it inexplicable.

Why? How?

After learning that they were mistaken–that they’d been incorrect, that it wasn’t true, why would they refuse to revise their understanding of the situation? How could they keep on enjoying it without adjusting their attitude at all?

But the real problem was that while I totally got how Tsukihi's stance felt precarious, up in the air, in the face of her unyielding club-mates, I didn't know what I could do about it.

In actuality, this tale of an aberration–this ghost story had already been taken care of thanks to her own resourcefulness and talent.

She couldn't possibly be telling me to strong-arm the other six members of the Tsuganoki Second Middle tea ceremony club, though. My little sister Tsukihi Araragi might be prone to clubbing me over the head with unceremonious requests, but even she wouldn't go that far.

That'd be asking for trouble.

A high school senior busting into a middle school and childishly browbeating six students into submission… That would be as uncool as it gets, the very embodiment of harassment.

I'd be guaranteed a severe tongue-lashing, but Tsukihi's subsequent standing with the tea club would likely be the nadir of her young life. She'd go down in history as the li'l sis character with a monster brother rather than monster parents.

That'd be the end of the heroic tale of the Fire Sisters.

In which case, when she said she needed to talk to me, maybe she wasn't looking for answers and just wanted to gripe? If so, I'd already fulfilled my role…

If I tried to leave now, would she wield the point of that three-color pen at me again? *Wield* it in a manner unique to my little sister, and the old Senjogahara?

"Listen, Tsukihi," I decided to make my move and get to the point–not of the pen, mind you. I only fence with words. "What is it you want me to do?"

“Huh? What kind of a question is that, big brother, have you not been listening?”

“Oh, wipe that surprised look off your face…and that hostile tone of voice isn’t going to get you anywhere, either.”

“Hupp!”

She reprised her three-color ballpoint pen attack. I somehow managed to dodge it again, but my skin nearly ended up looking like a tricolor flag.

Well, given the way those pens are constructed, I guess it’d be impossible to get me with all three colors in one blow… Worried it might be dangerous to get up and leave without warning, I’d asked her straight out like that, but unfortunately I was painted into a corner, game-wise it was checkmate. It had been my fate to be attacked.

“Keep spouting bullshit, big brother, and you’ll get the tricolor penalty.”

“What is this, the French Revolution? No more beating around the bush, no more threats, just tell me straight out, Tsukihi. What is it you want me to do?”

“When you put it that way, I don’t know what to say–but I’m asking for your opinion. I want to research the question. Do you believe in ghosts, big brother?”

We were back where we started.

I’d assumed that her question was just a conversation starter, a lead-in to the topic at hand, but apparently I was wrong.

In fact.

We’d started with the main event–there’d been plenty of threats and beating around the bush afterwards, but the topic at hand had been on the table right from the start.

The conversation began to get complicated when I accidentally hit on the specifics of the situation–but in essence her question was a simple one.

She was asking me where I stood.

This little sister of mine.

“Hm…”

Come to think of it, while I’d been turning the matter over in my mind, I had yet to voice any kind of answer to that simple question.

Because it was actually a hard question to answer.

I couldn’t just blurt something out.

I could tell Tsukihi what she wanted to hear, of course, but someone might be listening–the walls have ears, the hills have eyes.

And in my shadow is a vampire.

“Come on, big brother. What’s the holdup? It’s a simple yes or no question.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Tsukihi. You’ll find that in life, questions can’t always be taken care of with a simple yes or no.”

“Oh yeah? If you like, I can take care of you right now with a simple yes or no.”

She had her tricolor ballpoint pen at the ready.

Or should I say guillotine?

Seemed like a preview of what might happen if she didn’t like my answer…in which case the only option left to me was to tell her what she wanted to hear.

Hmmm.

Well, with the teacakes just about finished, and my teacup empty for ages, maybe I ought to shake my head no and take off.

I had plenty of studying to do, after all.

I answered Tsukihi's question.

"No. I don't believe in ghosts. You're right and the other members of your tea club are wrong, I guarantee it, so don't let it get to you. You know you're right, so stick to your guns, keep doing what you're doing."

In the ten-plus years since my little sister Tsukihi was born, I'd never said anything so supportive towards her, but I did now.

To which Tsukihi, or should I say Atlas, responded, "That's what I thought. But it still bothers me."

"…"

Not changing your tune, even when someone guarantees that you're right?

Not so different from those other people, are you?

Not so different.

Everyone has that side to them, of course–just as, in real life, questions can't always be taken care of with a simple yes or no, the reality of human sensibilities and emotions isn't always as simple as right or wrong.

People might be shown what's correct and what isn't and still opt for the latter knowing full well what they're doing.

And in the course of everyday life, sometimes you can't help but "worry about things that are pointless to worry about," as Tsukihi was currently in the process of discovering.

The advice I gave her basically amounted to embracing the idea that "there's no point in worrying about it, so don't"; while there might be someone somewhere in the world who can do that, it's basically impossible for the rest of us.

We regret things that are pointless to regret.

And we keep on saying things that are meaningless to say.

Human life boils down to that brand of hopeless monotony.

I recalled the matter Karen had come to me about the previous month–the inconspicuous old tree growing behind her dojo. Thinking back on it now, how many of the students actually thought the old tree was freaky, how many of them were actually frightened?

Them too.

They must've realized that their own reaction, *to hell with this old tree, cut it down,* was excessive and known they were over the line.

But that feeling had been unstoppable. It never stopped until it ground to a halt thanks to Hanekawa's proposal.

Changing how you feel.

Switching mental gears is no easy thing–it might even be utterly impossible.

"This might sound overblown," I said, "but it's really more common than you'd think. Take hyenas, for instance. We have a negative image of them, right? They can't seem to shake their reputation as cunning creatures that scavenge a lion's kill, snatching whatever carrion they can get. But hyenas actually do their own hunting, and if anything it's the male lions, with their big manes, that are often too lazy to hunt… Listen, I'm not trying to show off my knowledge of trivia here. I mean, this isn't trivia, it's the kind of thing that people who know stuff know without having to go to the trouble of looking it up, just common knowledge–and yet it doesn't make any inroads, doesn't ripple out into the general consciousness. Once a perception of something has taken root, once it's got a label slapped on it, that never goes away even after the truth comes

out–people go on with their lives pretending that they don't know the truth, pretending that they don't know they're wrong. I wonder why."

"People avert their eyes from inconvenient truths, Araragi-senpai," answered Kanbaru-kohai.

The next day, at the Kanbaru residence.

To give a slightly more detailed description of the situation, the next day I went to Kanbaru's to clean her room, a kingdom descending anew into chaos that I was attempting to restore–and as always showing no inclination whatsoever to help, that was the answer she gave from the hallway.

"What was it called? Senjogahara-senpai told me about it… Something-bias. Even in emergencies, people refuse to accept inconvenient information and keep on telling themselves, '*I'll* be okay'…"

"Maybe this isn't the same? Since in this case, maintaining a belief in monsters–in the 'eighth person,' doesn't actually put the tea club members at ease or benefit them."

"But isn't believing in monsters even though it's illogical more fun than logically denying their existence? Sure, it's a bit different from people's views of hyenas…but don't you think that might be what's going on here?"

Kanbaru and I shared an understanding of so-called aberrations–of demons, and monkeys, and snakes–that Tsukihi lacked, so we were able to have a somewhat more in-depth discussion.

"What Senjogahara was talking about was probably normalcy bias."

“There you go again, calling her by her last name. There’s no need to try and keep up appearances with me. Why don’t you just call her Hitagin like always?”

“Not with other people… Wait, I never call her that!”

“Oops. It wasn’t Hitagin? Was it Leggings?”

“Why’d I call her that when she doesn’t wear leggings? Anyway, in terms of the fun factor–from what I understand the tea club members aren’t enjoying this rumor about the ‘eighth member’ all that much.”

“What exactly is the rumor? If Tsukihi’s already dealt with the tale itself for this aberration, maybe there’s no point in hearing it–but depending on the details, we might actually find a satisfactory explanation,” Kanbaru suggested.

From the hallway.

Seriously, how did it make her feel…standing in the hallway with her arms folded watching her senpai clean her room?

Or maybe that kind of thing doesn’t faze rich people. Seems like appropriate behavior for a monarch, sure.

“Araragi-senpai, what if it’s like the case at Karen’s dojo you were telling me about–the students were able to accept the tree once they thought of it as a ‘guardian deity,’ right? Wasn’t this ‘eighth person’ like that? The tea ceremony club’s eighth member…turns out to be the god of the tea ceremony.”

“The god of the tea ceremony…”

Who would that be?

Though I’ve heard of the god of tea, and maybe some tea-related apparitions.

“No, it isn’t like that. Well, I only know a few tidbits, and I’m an outsider when it comes to their school so I can’t say for certain, but as a ghost story I think this one falls under the creepy heading.”

“Hmm. Give me the full rundown, then. I’m listening.”

“…”

Getting a little imperious, aren’t we?

Acting like she’s the ace of the basketball team–come on, you’re no longer an ace or a star. You’re nothing but a popular girl!

Okay, I suppose that’s reason enough to be imperious.

“Like I said, I only know a few tidbits so I can’t give you the full rundown… But maybe a ‘school ghost story’ got adapted from its original form. Adapted, or applied to a tea ceremony club–”

“And what’s the ‘original’ ghost story?”

“I think it’s the kind where there’s an extra classmate. Like, a class of thirty suddenly has thirty-one students… But you don’t want to be the one to notice, because then you trade places with that person…and have to carry on as the unnoticed ‘thirty-first student,’ watching helplessly as the ‘original thirty-first student’ cozies up to all your former friends…”

“Hmm. The replacement type. Or is it the spirited-away type? Scary either way,” commented Kanbaru, hardly sounding afraid–I mean, it’s a “scary story,” but not the kind that could scare a high school student. “So applying it to their own situation, they started to sense the presence of an ‘eighth member’? In which case, maybe I was wrong.”

“What kind of story did you think it was?”

“Well, even if it’s not a ‘guardian deity,’ wouldn’t some sort of leprechaun be pretty fitting? A traditional tearoom is a *zashiki* sitting area, seems perfect for a Zashiki-warashi. And if the ‘eighth member’

was an aberration that brings good fortune, then no matter how logically Tsukihi refuted its existence, the others would want to keep on believing."

"True."

If it was a Zashiki-warashi… In that case, it wouldn't just be about the fun factor, since driving one out brings down ruin on your household–but that's not what we were dealing with.

In fact, the gist, or the highlights, or the "come-on" of this ghost story was that the eighth member might replace you, and that you yourself might vanish. You'd want to disprove it.

That'd benefit them more.

"In which case, this is something else Senjogahara-senpai told me about, but maybe we're dealing with deviance amplification rather than normalcy bias. If nine out of ten people agree about something, even if it's incorrect or irrational, it seems correct and rational and the tenth person appears to be wrong–maybe we should call it majority rule. It's hard to change your opinion in the face of that kind of pressure."

"Majority rule, huh…"

Senjogahara herself doesn't side with majorities, but maybe that's why she's so knowledgeable about the theories behind them. She stands apart from the illusion of consensus.

"Still," I said, "it's a little extreme–you'd think at least one other member would agree with Tsukihi."

That'd make things a lot easier. With seven members of the tea ceremony club, the majority rule stood at six against one.

Six against one, definitely not great odds–but if the ratio were five against two, she might have a fighting chance. If she could form a faction, it'd be harder for the group to ignore her.

If that wasn't enough, one more would certainly do it–four against three, that'd be a proper fair fight.

"Right now my little sister's in a pretty disadvantageous position because that ain't happening. It's stressing her out."

"What's her current mindset? We're not talking about the illusion of consensus…but it must be quite a burden. Is she starting to think maybe she should just go along with the others?"

"The fact that she isn't is what's so amazing about her." Or where she's biting Senjogahara's style–unlike my girlfriend, though, Tsukihi generally likes group activities. "She's like the poor man's Senjogahara."

"Don't call your own little sister a poor man's anything…"

"Anyway, the situation isn't as urgent as it was with Karen. Things aren't so severe that accepting or denying the existence of this 'eighth member' is going to be the end of the club, it's not going to destroy any friendships–it's just that she's hit a wall."

"A wall?"

"Tsukihi claims the mantle of a defender of justice, so an environment where people are ignoring what's right and true is uncomfortable for her–"

Although.

It wouldn't be comfortable for anyone…

"–but actually it's all too common for irrationality and illogic to rule for no good reason. Is Tsukihi still too young for that lesson?"

"Too young… We've been talking about Tsukihi and Karen this whole time, but what about you?"

"Hnh?"

"Whose side are you on this time?"

“This time it’s not a question of allies and enemies… I took Karen’s side, but that was, how can I put this, because things were moving in a bad direction. I did what little I could, though maybe it was too much.”

“Hm. Except, that little push actually came from Hanekawa-senpai,” Kanbaru reminded me. “Her travails never end, do they? Even in the second term. There was that thing with the tiger–”

“…”

“Well, it’s a tad bit tough to tell from the tidbits you’ve told me, but nothing seems to be affected by believing in the ‘eighth member’ or affirming its existence–it’s just about how people feel.”

“Yup. About how people feel–but whatever else you might say, they’re impressively strong-willed, my little sisters. Both of them. Not that I’m taking sides, but if it were me–if I were a member of the tea club, I’d totally cave and go along with everybody else.”

“Heheh. It all becomes clear. The ‘eighth member’ was you all along, wasn’t it, Araragi-senpai?”

“What the hell? Don’t go confusing the issue. Anyway,” I began to wrap things up.

Apologies to Tsukihi, but this was basically the stuff of idle chatter–it wasn’t something I wanted to talk about forever, and I was anxious to move on to the next topic.

I said, “Experiencing that kind of nonsense builds character, it’ll be useful for her down the line.”

“Nonsense, huh? Tsukihi could not have been more sensible, though–which makes me want to take her side.”

“When do you ever not want to take a cute girl’s side, Kanbaru?”

“It’s got nothing to do with cuteness. I mean, the other six club-mates might be cute, too.”

"…"

What a thing to be considering.

This whole time, was she factoring in the other girls' looks?

"The question of who is cuter, Tsukihi or the others–the so-called Schrödinger's Pussycat," Kanbaru mused.

"'So-called'? Never even heard of it. Take your so-calling more seriously."

"But don't you feel the same way? You and me…" She looked first at her bandaged left arm–and then at my shadow, as I cleaned her room. "We know aberrations. We know nonsense–irrationality, absurdity. Which is exactly why I want to take Tsukihi's side in this. Your little sister, who'd try to deny the existence of aberrations–and martyr herself to reality."

"…"

"Oh, um, I hope it's clear I'm not trying to deny Shinobu's pride of place? Her cuteness is indescribable. Truly, she is Schrödinger's Imp."

"Don't call her an imp. What kind of a 'truly' is that? Gimme something a little trulier."

"Trulier?"

"But sure–when you put it like that, I guess I agree, but still, there's nothing we can do, is there? There's nothing we can do for her, is there?"

"If you say it must be done, I'm ready and willing to storm the Tsuganoki Second Middle tea ceremony club."

"I'm not going to say that."

Kanbaru would have no problem arguing a bunch of middle school girls into submission…but that would clearly be going too far.

Was there no way to soothe Tsukihi's feelings?

Without going too far, in other words, peaceably?

"Well, there is a way."

"Huh?"

"If you're just looking to humor Tsukihi for now, Araragi-senpai, there's a way."

"That's not what I'm looking to do…but there is?"

"Uh huh. I mean, I'm with you, I agree that Tsukihi's too young to face this reality head on–though there's one little problem with my solution."

"A problem? That doesn't sound good… What's this problem?"

"Ultimately, it's going to involve fooling her. So, Araragi-senpai, do you have any objection to lying to your little sister?"

"Ha ha ha."

As if.

Well, since Tsukihi already took care of the aberration tale, this whole story has been a sort of epilogue–so maybe I should call it the bonus material.

I accepted Kanbaru's suggestion and persuaded Tsukihi–persuaded, or mollified, or something like that.

Why did the other members of the tea ceremony club–those other six girls, persist in believing in the "eighth member"? Even after the truth was clear, after they were shown reason, why did they let themselves be ruled by emotion and maintain their belief? Basically, *if I could explain that,* if I could rationalize their irrationality, Tsukihi would be satisfied.

So Kanbaru rationalized it: *they all believed in the "eighth member" for Tsukihi's sake.*

Just as she did the other day when she came to me for advice, Tsukihi often made free with the clubroom's supplies: the tea, the teacakes. Not that big of a deal, but strictly speaking, not aboveboard–if it became public, the club's activities might even be suspended again.

So everyone affirmed the existence of the "eighth person"–as a kind of camouflage for the liberties Tsukihi was taking.

That's how we rationalized it. By inventing this "eighth person," they could explain away the speed with which the supplies were dwindling.

Not that they contrived to get their stories straight beforehand, but to cover for Tsukihi, they all allowed this "eighth member" to join the club–

"So that's it! They did it for me!"

The dumbass fell for it in a split second.

"And there I was, boorishly blathering about how ghosts don't exist–when I was the one who was haunting them!"

Nice try.

Well, the truth was probably completely different–but even if this lie were the truth, Tsukihi was accommodating enough to go along with it.

"Okay, I'll buy it!"

I'll drink the Kool-Aid.

Or in this case, the tea.

And just like that, she seemed to forget about the whole thing.

“Hm,” Kanbaru wondered when I reported this outcome. “The other members of the club, or you–who was Tsukihi buying it from?”

CHAPTER EIGHT
KOYOMI MOUNTAIN

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30		

11
November

What would Ogi Oshino have to say about roads? I've yet to hear her, this niece of Mèmè Oshino's, say much of anything on the subject. Intersections and traffic lights, sure, but she's kept mum on the topic of roads themselves. Well, she may have made some offhand remark about them in the course of one of our idle chats, but if she did, I don't recall it. Her words have a strange way of disappearing from my memory–and not just her words: her behavior, her appearance, they're all difficult for me to retain.

Gone with the wind.

Just like a rumor after seventy-five days–everything pertaining to her vanishes as if it had never been there.

However.

We did have a conversation that I do remember, not about roads, not about roadways, but about road construction–it wasn't even all that recently, and yet I remember it like it was yesterday.

"Araragi-senpai–sorry if I sound political, but in our society, roads mainly seem to be a means of creating jobs and stimulating the economy, don't they…what with all the maintenance, repairs, and construction."

That's what she said.

She, Ogi Oshino–in an all-knowing tone that reminded me of her missing uncle.

A philosophical tone quite unlike what you'd expect from a high school student, and your junior to boot–though her resigned air did set it apart from Oshino's brand of incisiveness.

The desire to balance good and evil, positive and negative, light and dark, on the other hand–her insistence on maintaining neutrality, that was Oshino to a tee.

“Not so much a space for walking or running–the engineering project itself is what makes a road a road. In the modern world, the goal of roadways lies in the very act of opening up the path.”

It’s like living for the sake of being alive–she went on.

“Even if it’s a road that not a single person will ever walk down. It doesn’t matter, the act of creating a road where there wasn’t one before is enough to give it meaning.”

Building a road that no one will ever walk down.

Building a road that no one will use.

And then rebuilding it when it goes to seed or falls apart, as many times as is necessary, repairing it ad infinitum. Filling in every crack that opens, washing away whatever filth collects–maintaining it as a road.

“What do you think, Araragi-senpai? Do you think it’s meaningless–to build a road that no one will walk down?”

To build a road that no one will walk down.

Such a road–do you think it’s meaningless?

“Maybe you do at that–Araragi-senpai. After all, my uncle tells me you’ve got a tendency to look for too much meaning in everything. But I’m not saying that it’s meaningless. I’m just saying that it’s wrong.”

Wrong.

Did she mean wrong as in different–or wrong as in mistaken? I couldn’t tell, so I didn’t answer her question and instead turned it around on her.

What.

Do you think?

Was it, or was it not, meaningless to build a road that no one will walk down? Grinning cheerfully, she–

Ogi Oshino was all too happy to answer my question.

Unfortunately, as to what that answer was–I have absolutely no recollection.

“Winter’s really arrived, hasn’t it–feels like it might start snowing at any moment,” she remarked. “Even with all this talk about global warming, in the end, winter’s as cold as ever–we’ll never get eternal summer. What do you think?”

“I mean, it’s certainly cold, but…I dunno. According to the weather report, it won’t stay cold. The average temperature’s rising, even for winter. Maybe with how much hotter it’s been getting in summer, even if winter temperatures don’t drop all that much, we just experience it relatively as being as cold as ever?”

“It all becomes clear. Wise words indeed, Araragi-senpai. No wonder my uncle took off his hat to you–”

“Just to set the record straight, your uncle never once took off his hat to me. He didn’t even wear a hat…”

“Ha hah, it’s only an expression. I think it came from a time when everyone wore hats and took them off when someone important passed by… By doing so you’re acknowledging your inferiority, aren’t you? It’s like asking your opponent to play with a one-piece handicap in *shogi.* And you’re right, however much my dear uncle admired you, I don’t suppose he saw you as his superior.”

“…”

There’s a mountain in my town, and at the top of that mountain is a shrine. I call it a mountain, but it’s too small for anyone to care about climbing it, and I call it a shrine, but it’s too dilapidated for anyone to go worship there.

Still and all, a mountain's a mountain, and a shrine's a shrine.

Early morning, November first.

A few hours before I had to be at school, Ogi and I were ascending that mountain together–headed for the shrine at the top.

When was the last time I'd climbed this mountain?

That time with Shinobu, maybe?

And before that–Kanbaru and Sengoku and I came up here together.

Ogi doesn't look all that buff, but she must have legs of iron because she was striding ahead of me, almost like a guide–with my vampiric power currently at a low ebb, I felt like she might leave me behind altogether.

"If my uncle ever used the expression 'a one-piece handicap' towards you, I'm afraid it would hurt both of your rankings–"

"Listen, Ogi. I really don't care what happens to our rankings… Come on, won't you tell me already? Why I'm out here on this trek with you?"

"Ugh, I've already explained it to you, haven't I?"

"…?"

Had she?

I guess it rang a–nah, while I was leaning into my role as a character with a hopeless weakness for girls of late, I doubted I'd let myself be dragged out to a deserted mountain without knowing a thing about why, without asking, just doing as I was told.

She must've given me a good reason.

It's just that I'd completely forgotten what it was–hmm, maybe I'd better ease up on the exam prep? At last I was getting used to

memorizing reign names, but I needed to keep my priorities straight. I couldn't fill my brain with school-related stuff at the cost of my regular memory.

Anyway, if she already explained it to me, I felt awkward asking her again at that point. I suppose I wanted to impress this junior of mine, whom I'd only just met–all the more so because she was Oshino's niece.

…

Wait.

How had I even met her in the first place?

"Sorry, Ogi, but–remind me how we met?"

If I was trying to impress my junior, asking such a basic question was probably the worst possible way to go about it, but it just kind of slipped out.

"Ha hah. You're spirited today, Araragi-senpai. Did something good happen to you?"

She'd replied without slackening her pace. When I looked at her feet, I saw that she hadn't even bothered to put on sneakers though we were climbing a steep mountain path.

She knew we would be, and yet she'd come so unprepared–maybe this didn't even qualify as mountainous terrain as far as Ogi was concerned.

She didn't look it, but was she the Patagonia type?

The path was in pretty rough shape…

"It was Kanbaru-senpai who introduced us. Don't you remember?"

"Yeah? Oh–now that you say it, that sounds right. Um, remind me, Ogi, are you a freshman on the basketball team or something?"

“You’re full of questions today–are you that curious about me? I’m a bookworm, I’m not involved in sports at all.”

“If you’re a bookworm…how come you’re so good at climbing mountains?”

“Because mountains are homes to the gods, I guess? Right in my wheelhouse, unworthy as I am.”

I didn’t take her meaning.

Despite the fact that I didn’t, it was somehow convincing–the statement possessed a murky persuasiveness, and I couldn’t press the point. In that regard, she was every inch Oshino’s–that expert’s niece.

I kept quiet and listened to what she had to say.

As she stayed one step ahead of me.

“Because, well, mountains are like aberrations themselves–my area of expertise, in other words. I understand why people feel inclined to establish shrines at their summits. Then again, Kita-Shirahebi Shrine and this mountain have absolutely nothing to do with each other. I suppose jamming two unrelated things together is bound to create discord–”

“Discord?”

“Ah, forget it. I said ‘discord’ because I couldn’t think of a more appropriate word, but it isn’t as drastic as all that. Usually, any mistakes in the initial configuration aren’t hard to correct.”

“Are you saying that when they built this shrine here way back when, someone made a mistake?”

“Even if they had, is what I’m saying. I’m talking about trying that idea on for size. A first fitting. What I’m saying, Araragi-senpai–is something like this, for instance. Right now you’re feverishly devoting yourself to your exam prep because you want to go to the

same school as your sweetheart, but say you and Ms. Senjogahara broke up. What would you do? Would you give up on your studies?”

“That’s an unpleasant for instance…”

The way she bluntly made insensitive remarks in spite of her impeccable manner of speaking really jibed with the notion that she was Kanbaru’s junior.

I frowned, but Ogi continued on without any indication that she cared–that is, she didn’t even turn around. “I don’t think you would. You might shoot for a different school, but I don’t think you’d throw away these long months of hard work. Or rather, I don’t think you could. Even if you blew it with your baby, I don’t think you’d throw the baby out with the bathwater. Am I wrong?”

“You’re implying that I made a mistake when I started going out with Senjogahara. Ease up, Ogi.”

“I’m afraid I can’t. I’m not an easygoing person–as you can see. Though if I’ve offended you, I’m sorry. It’s a purely hypothetical example anyway. I have faith that no what-if scenario can truly offend you, Araragi-senpai.”

“…”

Well, taking her to task over every little analogy certainly wouldn’t make me seem like a very tolerant senpai.

I assume the point Ogi was trying to make was that your original goal isn’t the be-all-end-all–to borrow her analogy, it’s true that I started my exam prep with the overriding goal of going to the same university as Senjogahara, but that doesn’t mean that’s still my only motivation.

Let’s say.

It's an unthinkable "let's say," but even if things don't work out between me and Senjogahara–I'm not sure I could ditch out on the grudging enjoyment I've found in studying.

Partly because I'd hate to let all my hard work go to waste, as in the Concorde Effect, but that's definitely not the only reason.

"Hey, Ogi."

"What is it? Are you angry, after all? That's a real shame; I wasn't trying to make you angry. In fact, I spoke with the best of intentions."

"No, listen, I'm not angry…but what do you mean, the best of intentions? Uh, weren't we talking about mountains and shrines, rather than my exam prep? This mountain, and the shrine at the top of it? A mistake in the initial configuration–"

"Yes, true," said Ogi. "Only a malicious person would call it a mistake. Even if it was one, I think it's safe to declare the statute of limitations long past on that–"

Though the trend in society seems to be toward abolishing statutes of limitations for the worst crimes, she noted–and here my guide did stop walking, and turned around to face me.

"I've come to fix that mistake."

That's what she said.

Her putative reason for currently climbing this mountain–okay, sure, that did ring a bell.

I felt like I'd gotten a more detailed explanation, even.

It was precisely because I'd found her reason convincing that I was there with her, having eked out a moment's breathing room from my exam prep–and when I looked.

She hadn’t stopped so she could turn and face me. She wasn’t waiting for me because my pace was flagging. It appeared that we’d reached our destination.

Behind her stood a tumbledown torii.

Behind it, then, was a sacred path where neither worshippers, nor gods now, walked–and farther behind stood a crumbling shrine hall.

“…”

It wasn’t anywhere close to time for a traditional New Year’s visit, but at any event, our climb was at an end, and we arrived at that place of discord–at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

The subject of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine probably warrants a bit of extra explanation–fate has seen fit to bind me to the place in some strange way, as I’ve already mentioned, but above and beyond that, it’s a spot that lately–since spring break, to be precise–has become one of the hottest in town.

Since spring break.

Since Shinobu Oshino, in other words–since the vampire.

It was about half a year ago that she came to our town. The arrival of a legendary vampire, a demon beautiful enough to send chills down your spine. And the day the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded vampire arrived–was a momentous one.

I don’t just mean that it was momentous to me, nor is that some rhetorical flourish to indicate that the existence of vampires in the real world is itself momentous–the mere fact that such a mighty aberration was “on the move” was enough to be big news in *the industry.*

Maybe the analogy of a hurricane will make it clearer.

The category and trajectory, speed and scale of any given hurricane will dominate the news cycle for as long as it lasts. There's a wealth of meteorological information out there, a wealth of meteorological phenomena, but is there any other kind of "weather" to which we give categories and even names?

That's pretty much what it was.

Shinobu Oshino's–the former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade's journey was in and of itself a type of disaster.

Which is why Oshino mobilized–and put everything he had into disaster recovery. During his time here, he did come off as a grubby expert, collecting local ghost stories, and urban legends and campfire tales, which is mostly how he makes his living, but he was also engaged in other work.

In fact, as far as it goes, I directly assisted him–first as a party involved in the vampire brouhaha, and then to repay my debt.

In order to return our spiritually disarrayed town to its normal state–it was terribly disarrayed by the coming of a legendary vampire–I was asked to help rectify the center of that spiritual disarray.

The center, or from what I heard.

More like an epicenter–and it was here, at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

People talk about urban air pockets, so borrowing that terminology, I guess you could call this place a rural air pocket: a gathering place for spiritual disarray, for all the "bad elements" that precede aberrations, but which can provide the raw material for their creation. A hangout, a haunt, you might say.

A dumping ground.

Not a blade of grass survives where a vampire passes–such seemed the fury with which Shinobu struck, but if only that had been

true. Because lo and behold, the byproducts, the after-effects she left behind turned out to be a real pain in the neck.

Given the horrors, physical and mental, that I went through during those two short weeks when I myself was a vampire, I'm loath to admit it, but I can understand why those vampire-expurgation experts went a little overboard in their enthusiasm to exterminate Shinobu.

In point of fact, a friend of my sister's called Nadeko Sengoku went through a grievous experience thanks to the "bad elements" gathered at this shrine–you might even say that the swindler who was the original cause of that grievous experience was yet another "bad element" that had crawled out of the woodwork in response to the whole vampire brouhaha.

Well, maybe that has more to do with how I feel about him–but either way, Oshino made it clear that depending on how things went, depending on certain logistical niceties, Kita-Shirahebi Shrine could very well end up as ground zero for the outbreak of a Great Yokai War.

A Great Yokai War.

It sounds so fake, but it's no joke. Why dump into the lap of an ordinary high school student like me the job of nipping something like that in the bud? Either Oshino was living on the edge, or I couldn't clear my five-million-yen debt to him unless he gave me something really big to do.

To put it another way, it was a job worth five million yen.

"I wonder if the whole reason Kita-Shirahebi ended up as an anchor for 'bad elements' was that it was a ruined, overgrown shrine without a god–that it was empty?" I ruminated, feeling emotional as I cast my gaze over the abandoned shrine for the first time in a long time. The source of emotion wasn't the dilapidated state of the

shrine itself, though, but rather my thoughts of Oshino. Maybe coming here with his niece had brought him closer to mind.

“An anchor, did you say? Ha hah,” laughed Ogi. Lightheartedly–it was forced, out of keeping with the atmosphere of the abandoned shrine. “Well, I guess people need some kind of anchor in their lives–”

“Um, I’m not talking about people here, I’m talking about ‘bad elements.’”

“Don’t people also fall under that heading?”

“…”

Like swindlers, is that what she meant?

As Oshino’s niece, maybe Ogi knew that con man–*I could bring him up,* I thought, wavering for a moment. If I did and she didn’t know what I was talking about, I’d have no choice but to tell her all about the bastard; if she did know him, and I got too worked up about it, that’d be just as unpleasant.

It’d be one thing if she brought it up, but for now I was going to hold off on broaching the subject of that swindler. I swallowed the words that had risen to my tongue.

And yet, something he had told me came to mind.

That in order to disseminate something–in order to make something go viral, first there has to be an empty space for it, and that emptiness is something you can “create”–

“…”

Hurricane Shinobu struck, making landfall with a rampaging fury.

Then hordes of “bad elements” massed in the emptied town as if they sought a feeding ground–at this shrine, which was emptiest of all.

And if my reading is correct (even if it doesn't deserve to be called a reading), it was "emptiest of all" because the shrine lay in ruins and the god was absent–

"…So where did the god go?"

"Did you say something, Araragi-senpai?"

"Forget it…"

I was thinking about this talisman I'd been entrusted with–that someone had forced on me, really. The truth is, I was at a loss as to what to do with it.

I'd been instructed to do something when even Shinobu couldn't–it was a talisman, so maybe I should present it as an offering somewhere?

I wanted to get rid of it, if possible.

"By the way, Araragi-senpai, isn't it kind of odd that we call anyone who visits a shrine a 'worshipper'? Most of them are probably just tourists."

"Hm? Oh… Well, I see what you're saying, but I can't think of a better word off the top of my head. So, Ogi. How exactly are you going to fix this discord? This mistake with the initial configuration that you mentioned–I'm guessing a serpent deity wasn't a fitting object of worship for a shrine founded on this mountain?"

"Fitting? You make it sound like we're talking about someone's outfit."

Ogi, the niece of an expert, casually strode straight down the middle of the ritual path. Even a greenhorn like me knows that the center is where the gods walk, and humans aren't supposed to tread there…but if no god lived here, then maybe it was no path at all.

Passing by the literally, not metaphorically empty hand-washing basin, she arrived at the shrine itself–and peered up at it.

“Hmm…” she muttered, “this is turning into a hassle–isn’t it. Makes me want to turn around and go home. If I had a home to go to, that is.”

“Huh? What about the Oshinos’?”

“Well, sure, there’s the Oshinos’ but–this…is a delicate balance. How could my uncle leave things in such a state and take off… Is this it?”

Ogi pointed at a talisman that had been pasted to the hall. I say *had been pasted,* but I was the one who pasted it there.

I came to the shrine for that purpose on Oshino’s orders, accompanied by Kanbaru–and affixed it with essentially no knowledge of what I was doing, certainly in the dark about the talisman’s spiritual purpose, so it was blasphemy in a way. But apparently the situation required that the thing be placed there not by an expert, but by someone like Kanbaru or myself, fully immersed in that other world and at the same time in the dark about it.

So it wasn’t entirely out of kindness, in other words to help me repay my debt, that Oshino handed me an extraordinary job: climbing a mountain once for five million yen.

I’m sure this other talisman that’s been entrusted to me serves a similar purpose–rather than being collateral for a loan, though, it’s more like a bad debt…

“Yeah, that’s the one,” I replied. “Oshino sent me to put it there, back in…”

I’m pretty sure it had been June. Was it already over four months since then? It’s not exactly something I view with nostalgia, but I’d been reunited with someone from my past, Nadeko Sengoku, thanks to the job Oshino gave me, so in that sense it meant something to me.

If it weren't for that chance reunion, we almost certainly wouldn't be hanging out now. Fate can be a funny thing.

And it's not just Sengoku–that goes for Hanekawa, and Senjogahara, and Hachikuji, and Kanbaru…

And Shinobu.

The vampire, too.

"Well, it's precarious, but I suppose you managed to maintain the balance–the air in the shrine grounds feels clear."

"Clear?"

"Yes. Hard to imagine it was a hangout for 'bad elements' to gather, if only temporarily."

"…"

If the grounds of this abandoned shrine were indeed "clear" at the moment, I had a sense of why that might be–obviously, since on the last day of summer vacation, Shinobu and I cleared them out ourselves.

Did I already tell Ogi?

"With this, we're good for the next hundred years or so–provided things stay as they are. We'll say it scattered nicely. It's not why I came here today, though…"

As she spoke, Ogi did something unbelievable. It was an inarguably bizarre act–true, no one had tended to the dilapidated shrine hall for who knows how long, but she suddenly began scaling its wall.

"Wh-What are you doing, Ogi?"

The actual feel I was going for was more of a shout: "What are you doing, Ogi?!" It can be hard to raise your voice when something happens, so it kind of ended up as a regular question.

I don’t know if her claim to be a bookworm was serious or a joke or what, but in the blink of an eye, she clambered up onto the roof of the shrine like a wild animal.

Like a monkey, or a cat.

There may’ve been time to say something, but there wasn’t time to stop her–it was quite a feat, and the fact that she was wearing restrictive clothing and the wrong shoes didn’t hold her back one bit.

Just because she’d made it to the top didn’t mean she was safe, though–at the risk of repeating myself, the shrine was dangerously dilapidated with the passage of time. It looked like one good gust of wind was all it would take.

The weight of a single person on the roof seemed like more than enough to flatten the building. If she were in an elevator, an alarm would be going off, one hundred percent.

But thanks to that derelict state, there were plenty of possible approaches to the ascent, the uneven surface providing plenty of hand- and footholds, which is maybe why Ogi was able to clamber up it like a jungle gym…

“What’s wrong? Come on up here with me, please.”

“No, um, I’m wearing a skirt today, so…”

As if.

Still, however devoted I may be to my juniors, I wasn’t ready for something quite so audacious, or so active.

“I don’t think I can do it.”

“Sure you can. My oh my, I never thought I’d hear such pitiful words from the man they call the Rising Dragon of Naoetsu High.”

“No one calls me that. What am I, a *shoryuken*?”

“Speaking of, I heard that Ryu from Street Fighter writes his name with the character for prosperity.”

“Really? Not the one for dragon?”

“Nope. Ken does use the character for fist, though. At least, that was true back in the day, maybe it’s changed at this point–which reminds me, Araragi-senpai,” she said, not actually looking down at me from her perch atop the roof but gazing out over the entire town, though I wasn’t sure how much of it you could see from up there. “This isn’t about dragons, but snakes. Do you mind?”

“Go ahead… You wanna talk about the serpent deity you’re trampling right now?”

“Serpent deities are the best example, sure, but even regular snakes are seen as sacred. Do you happen to know how that came about?”

“How snakes came to be seen as sacred?”

Hmm.

Well, they do engender a certain amount of dread, but it’s true, there’s nothing jarring about the idea of a “snake god”–why that might be, though, is something I’ve never really considered.

“They aren’t useful like horses or cattle, say, and they aren’t exactly woven into the fabric of our everyday lives–when some other reptile might have served, why do you think it’s the snake?”

“Why?”

“Consider the signs of the Chinese zodiac. Mouse, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake–doesn’t that sequence seem kind of unfair? Don’t you think the dragon must be a tough act to follow, coming right before the snake like that? Though the snake might be able to eke out a laugh with a line about the dragon having bad breath or something.”

“I’m pretty sure the Chinese zodiac isn’t a comedy club–” I began, craning my neck towards the roof.

It’s a surprisingly difficult angle at which to speak. Being looked down on by my junior didn’t exactly make me want to jump for joy, at the very least.

“–but I give up. Why is it? Is there some particular source? A myth about a snake or something–”

“No, though of course there are myths involving snakes. A veritable mountain of them. But what I’m asking here is why snakes might be eligible for a leading role.”

By *here,* did she mean the roof? I started thinking, or searching through my memory banks–Hanekawa or Oshino might have mentioned something.

“Wait, I’ve got it. Isn’t it because the snake is a symbol of immortality, or regeneration?”

“Oops, the right answer, out of the blue,” nodded Ogi. She didn’t look down at me, so it was hard to know if she was actually nodding or just moving her head to scope out the scenery from a different angle. “I guess college hopefuls really are a breed apart.”

“Well…thanks, but it’s not like this subject is included in the national exam.”

“They shed their skin as they grow–what’s more, the skins they leave behind retain a clear, or you might say obvious shape, since snakes don’t have any limbs to disrupt their evenness. And when you consider how stealthy snakes are, their shed skins might be easier to spot than the creatures themselves.”

“…”

“And in an age when the study of biology wasn’t as advanced as it is today, someone witnessing a snake molting–might well see it as sacred.”

Immortality, regeneration.

And–divinity?

“But listen, Ogi. That’s–”

“Yes, it is. Ecdysis is a physiological phenomenon that has nothing whatsoever to do with immortality. The exceptional vitality of snakes isn’t particularly rooted in fact, either.”

“It’s like how people view hyenas?”

“Yes, indeed. Mistaken assumptions from the outset–yet it’s impossible to rid snakes of their sacred image at this point, right? Even though–”

“…”

“Everyone learns about ecdysis in science class. There probably isn’t a single person in modern Japanese society who doesn’t know that snakes shed their skin, but nevertheless–somewhere deep down, everyone still holds snakes in some kind of awe. We unconsciously accept the term ‘serpent deity’ without a second thought–”

A mistake in the initial configuration.

No, not a mistake–it was just a different time.

“What’s wrong, Araragi-senpai? Do you think it’s boorish of me to explain away articles of faith through science? Am I being insensitive? But if you peruse the pages of history, you’ll find countless examples of people being arbitrarily executed or irrationally punished because of groundless faith, a veritable mountain of them.”

“Again with the veritable mountains…”

“If we should cut something loose, we ought to do so rationally–but no need to worry, it’s exactly as I just described. However boorishly one tries to explain it away, faith, once engendered, won’t be dispelled by reason or logic.”

“…”

I already knew this story.

I heard it last month, from my sister.

She logically debunked the rumors of a ghost haunting the tearoom, the “eighth member” of the tea ceremony club–debunked it thoroughly, from top to bottom, leaving no stone unturned. Knowing how immature she can be, I don’t even want to know how she went about it.

But in the end, it meant nothing.

The other members believed in the “eighth person” no matter what she said–and so within the confines of the club, it was Tsukihi who came across as the fringe loony.

“They say that faith can make even a sardine’s head sacred–so why not a snake’s discarded skin? That’s just the way it goes, Araragi-senpai. A few hundred years of science aren’t going to upend thousands, if not tens of thousands of years of instinct etched into our very bodies. That’s people for you, always going with their gut. That’s human society in a nutshell.”

“But don’t you think even that might change someday? If the scientific evidence mounts over hundreds or thousands of years, can’t humanity start prizing truth over feeling?”

“Probably, given that much time.”

Though I sincerely doubt human beings who prize truth over feeling could still be called "human"–qualified Ogi.

It seemed that way to me too.

That is.

I *felt* the same way.

"But the future can be considered in the future–after you're dead, Araragi-senpai, I'll go ahead and think about it."

Blithely tossing off this pronouncement about living longer, much longer, than me despite my tinge of vampirism, Ogi switched gears.

"The problem right now is what to do about this place, Kita-Shirahebi–where over a thousand years ago they enshrined a snake that lived for over a thousand years. Though you might just call it cleaning up after my uncle."

"What's that supposed to mean? In terms of keeping bad stuff from building up, that's already taken care of, isn't it?"

Wasn't that chapter over thanks to the "errand" Kanbaru and I ran?

"It isn't over. In fact, it's only just begun."

"You'd drop on me what's become a stock phrase…"

I wonder who said it first?

I'd like to know who came up with that line, same as with: *The real adventure starts now.*

"No, it really isn't over–because my uncle took a passive approach. He took care of the defense, but not the offense."

"Oshino's…not really the aggressive type, is he."

"Broadly speaking, my uncle succeeded in dealing with the fallout from Hurricane Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade striking this

town. He prevented a Great Yokai War from breaking out, which was definitely an achievement, a great achievement for him as an expert. But was that enough? Personally, I think my uncle's too soft–he didn't take any steps to deal with the next Heartunderblade-level aberration that shows up, did he?"

"…"

The person who entrusted the talisman to me–had said something similar. Or rather, said it and then entrusted the talisman to me.

But…

"Now that security has been ensured for the time being, I think the next step is to do something about this place itself–without a hangout, the 'bad elements' won't have anywhere to hang out."

"Hmmm… Well, I see what you're saying. But doesn't that seem like too much for a private individual to handle? If this is about Oshino having to procure the funds to rebuild this shrine…"

"Funding alone isn't going to cut it. Ideally, this abandoned shrine would be rebuilt from the ground up and turned into a place where a ceaseless stream of faithful came to worship year in and year out… In other words, the cult of the serpent deity needs to be revived… Ha hah, but it's just as you say, Araragi-senpai, that's probably impossible for individuals…"

Just because it's impossible doesn't mean we can give up, though, continued Ogi. "We can't shirk our duty to correct what needs correcting–even if it's meaningless, and even if it's impossible. Don't you think it's wrong not to correct mistakes, even if doing so is meaningless?"

"Well, as someone who's constantly making mistakes in his exam-prep workbook, I have no choice but to answer that question with a yes. But the reality is that there are things we can and cannot

do. Isn't that reality in its proper form? I can't get behind the idea that a world where anyone could do everything is proper."

"Nor can I. This is a question of will. A question of my determination to implement an offensive defense–ha hah, though 'offensive defense' makes my will seem pretty low-key. Um…should we get back to the topic at hand?"

"Was there ever one to get back to? I still don't have a clue what you're trying to tell me, Ogi. You said that the fact that this shrine is on this mountain involved a poorly balanced mistake in the initial configuration, but that of all things isn't something a high school girl like you could do anything about. It's not like we're going to move the shrine somewhere else at this point, after all this time."

"Yes, you're right," Ogi readily assented.

This sudden reversal was redolent of her uncle–the conversation never quite turned into an argument.

"Let me give you a little history lesson, Araragi-senpai. Originally, this shrine–Kita-Shirahebi was in another place altogether."

"Another place altogether?"

"Yes. It also had a different name back then–but it had to be moved for a reason, to this mountain. *It was jammed on here.* At the summit, where I'm standing now."

"…"

"If you want a slightly more in-depth explanation of what happened, at that time this mountain was considered highly sacred–and so the shrine was moved here to enjoy the benefits of its great spiritual power."

"When you say 'moved here'…you mean they established a branch shrine?"

"No, they moved the original shrine to this new location."

“You can do that? Okay, I don’t know much about how shrines work…but aren’t shrines and temples the kind of things that basically stay in one place?”

“Not necessarily. Sometimes they’re forced to move by circumstances beyond their control, like hurricanes, for instance–but that’s not what I want to talk about.”

“Huh? Weren’t you giving me a history lesson?”

“No, no, the history is irrelevant. I discussed it, but it wasn’t what I wanted to discuss–there’s just one question I want you to consider, Araragi-senpai. How did they, by which I mean the people involved with the shrine back when it was in a different location–at the time it had a different name as well, but for the sake of convenience and clarity let’s call it the old Kita-Shirahebi Shrine–relocate it to the top of this mountain?”

“How? Well, whenever it was, we’re talking about a super long time ago, right? Seems unlikely they had the technology to move the entire building as is–so I imagine they took it apart temporarily, then reassembled it at its new location. Smaller things like the offertory box they could probably bring as is…”

“Mm-hmm. This kind of structure is built without using a single nail–it’s probably not all that troublesome to dismantle it. You know, the way you describe it makes it sound like a ship in a bottle. To get the ship through the narrow opening, you put the pieces in first and then assemble it on the inside… But a shrine wouldn’t necessarily be easier to transport once you’ve taken it apart.”

“Huh?”

“Look–back then, not even the road we took to get here existed.”

As she said this, Ogi pointed beyond the torii to the steep mountain path, up which we’d climbed. Right, a steep mountain

path. It seemed hard enough to get lumber and building materials up such a narrow, precipitous route–but even that wasn't there?

"Nope. It wasn't there. The steps weren't installed until after the war. Recently."

"I wouldn't call it recently…"

"In Kyoto, 'after the war' apparently means after the Onin War, over five hundred years ago…"

"Well, I never believed that story. That can't actually be true."

"Think about it. It has a certain logic. During a so-called world war, Kyoto emerged relatively unscathed from the bombings that decimated other major cities, so it doesn't make sense for them to use that conflict as their yardstick. In light of that, it's quite plausible for them to use the expression to refer to the Onin War."

"Interesting. Maybe you've got a point…" When I hear the phrase, it takes me a second to realize people aren't referring to the time since spring break, so I guess I get it. "Anyway, the stairway was constructed relatively recently."

"Yes. So to put it in ship-in-a-bottle terms, the neck of the bottle was abnormally long and twisted, you see?"

"In which case…isn't the conventional approach to clear a road and use that for transporting the building materials up the mountain? Once it was finished, the road would've fallen into disuse and ended up obscured by the trees and plants that regrew there. At least until the stairway was constructed…"

"That's right. Anytime you want to build something, you have to build a road first. From the Silk Road on down, you could say the history of humanity has been the history of roadways. From roadways, to shipping lanes, to flight paths–I suppose the next step

will be pathways into space? That's still not the right answer, though."

"Huh? It's not?"

"No. As I told you a minute ago, this is a highly sacred mountain. That kind of large-scale construction would be out of the question. In the course of moving a shrine to the top of it, of course, a minimal amount of building would be inevitable, but doing everything possible to avoid harming the mountain was the humane route. Humane–or pious, I suppose."

"They didn't build a road?"

"Nope. Not an artificial one, anyway. Look, we came up that postwar stair, but if we plucked up our grit–we could've made it to the top without it, trekking through the foliage without the benefit of a real path, right?"

"…"

I wonder.

If we plucked up our grit, probably, but then I just don't have that much grit. Though it might be fine for a Patagonia type like Ogi…

Well, the grit of our forbearers was nothing to sneeze at.

Especially when it comes to architecture. They left behind all these unbelievable World Heritage treasures without recourse to Mister Bulldozer or Miss Crane…

I said I couldn't necessarily get behind the idea of a world where absolutely anyone could do literally anything, and yet, once you ignore little things like human rights and labor conditions, people can probably accomplish just about anything.

But even so.

Even on those terms–how would you actualize this shrine's "move"?

I don't know anything about the mountain's great spiritual power at the time, but from a purely architectural standpoint, how would they have moved a building to such a wildly unfavorable location?

"Are you saying they used some otherworldly skill? Supernatural superpowers, or spiritual ones… That really would take some great spiritual power."

"No, nothing like that. Just plain old human ingenuity. As far as I'm concerned, nothing could be more annoying than that 'move'–in a way it was the whole reason I had to come here, to this town."

Kita-Shirahebi? What white snake of the north? she muttered.

As if something bad had happened to her–though her expression didn't change, she gave the shrine roof beneath her feet a gratuitous kick.

In a truly unexpected turn of events, the person who unraveled the mystery of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, the relocation of what Ogi referred to as old Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, was none other than my little sister's friend Nadeko Sengoku.

"Piece of cake, Big Brother Koyomi." That night, for certain reasons, I'd hauled Nadeko Sengoku into the Araragi precinct for questioning, er, protective custody, and this is what she told me. "That's easy mode."

"Easy mode?"

No.

Whatever the answer turned out to be, transporting a building up to the top of a mountain wouldn't be a piece of cake, or easy mode–it wouldn't be a game at all.

But maybe it was precisely because Sengoku was a gamer, someone who could see it as a game, that the solution came to her so easily.

“Sounds like they didn’t tackle any large-scale projects like building a paved road, but as far as I can tell from what you told me, Big Brother Koyomi, they did at least a minimal amount of construction, right?”

“Hunh? Yeah…”

Incidentally, I kept Ogi’s name out of it when I asked Sengoku about this–not just her name but the very fact of her existence. Considering everything that’d been going on, I was somehow hesitant to introduce them to each other.

I can’t deny that I was maybe being overly cautious.

Or reading too much into things, at any rate…

But Sengoku had a right to know what I’d learned about Kita-Shirahebi Shrine–she was very much involved with that place, after all.

“So they did do a minimal amount of construction,” she said.

“Meaning?”

“The people who did the construction, the people who were made to eff-eck-choo-eight it–”

Her manner of speaking somehow ended up like Karen’s–why Karen’s, and not Tsukihi’s? Maybe it was a question of how influential they were or weren’t. Karen influenced easily, and Tsukihi was easily influenced…

“–had to at least clear the land on top of the mountain, to create space to build the shrine, right?”

“Uh huh. Well, clearing the land to make space… I guess that’s the minimal amount of construction? It’s not like that kind of open space would occur naturally in the middle of the mountains.”

“Yeah. And *they used the lumber they obtained to build the shrine.*”

Waste-free construction–Sengoku said.

Waste-free, minimal.

“Then they wouldn’t need to haul lumber all the way up to the top, right? In other words, they wouldn’t need to clear a path for that. They could just pluck up their grit and climb to the summit on whatever path, then lodge there while they were doing the actual construction.”

“…”

Well, you wouldn’t necessarily have to lodge there, but–huh. Since it’s a mountain, you’ve got all the lumber you need without having to transport it from somewhere else.

A veritable mountain of it.

A while back, I employed a falsehood about trees in the back courtyard of Karen’s dojo being used to build the dojo itself…but even if it was out of the question to harm such a sacred mountain for no good reason–using the lumber obtained from clearing a space for a shrine to build that very shrine was based in a spirit of keeping things local, or in contemporary terms, it was eco-friendly.

Such a simple answer was so clearly true once you heard it, there could be no other possibility–if the question Ogi posed had been, “How would you build a new shrine on top of a mountain with minimum harm done to the mountain itself?” it might’ve taken me a while, but I probably would’ve arrived at the same answer eventually.

But the question she posed had been…

“Hang on, though, Sengoku. We’re talking about relocation, not new construction…‘moving.’ If you use new lumber to build a new shrine, then isn’t that a different shrine?”

“They’d probably bring along their relish…I mean, their relic. But if you’re taking the trouble of moving to a new place, don’t you think you’d want a new building anyway?”

“…”

The ship of Theseus.

If its pieces are replaced in the course of repeated repairs until ultimately all the original parts are gone–can you still call it the same ship?

I think that’s how that one went.

“So the building was completely replaced, switched out, and only the name was brought along–no, wait, the name was changed too. Speaking of which…”

Whatever else may change.

As long as the faith doesn’t, then nothing has–just like how people’s feelings don’t change in the face of reason?

You can try to replace them, but they won’t change.

Immutable–no, maybe that idea is exactly what Ogi saw as being problematic.

Since, if I was to believe her, relocating the shrine to the top of that mountain had been a mistake.

A mistake?

No–what matters is the balance.

Worshipping a god atop that mountain upset some kind of balance–

“Speaking of which, Big Brother Koyomi. Your quiz made me wonder.”

“Um, it wasn’t a quiz…”

“That shrine is all falling apart, but do you think they’ll rebuild it at some point?”

“Rebuild…”

I hadn’t thought about it–but if they did rebuild it.

Modern times being what they are, I doubt they’d use lumber from the site for the construction–and of course they’d clear a road up to the top.

That’s how dilapidated the shrine was. Its reconstruction would be welcome–but in that case, what would happen to the balance Ogi was worried about?

If a shrine that already had no worshippers, that had no god, were to be rebuilt–renovated, just what new kind of faith would be born there?

No–not a new faith.

A continuation of an old one.

Whatever kind of logic you try to apply, whatever reason you employ.

Faiths, like aberrations–abide.

“It would be great if they rebuilt it,” Sengoku said. “If they did, I bet it wouldn’t be a hangout for ‘bad elements’ anymore. I bet by then, Mister Serpent–I mean the snake god would have returned to the shrine. Right, Big Brother Koyomi?”

“Oh… Yeah. That’d be really great.”

Would it?

I had no way of knowing–but that’s what I told Sengoku.

Either way, since a certain point in time, the balance in our town had gone into a one-way nosedive.

And I had a bad feeling about where things were headed.

No, it wasn’t just a bad feeling–a real feeling.

The day when I would use, when I’d have no choice but to use, the talisman entrusted to me by Izuko Gaen was perhaps not so far off.

CHAPTER NINE
KOYOMI TORUS

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

12
December

For Shinobu Oshino, to speak of a road was once to speak of the road at night. And, as supreme ruler of the darkest hours, the night road was the royal road–of the immortal king of aberrations.

That's all in the past now, of course–way in the past, and her current domain consists solely of my shadow, an area not even ten feet square. I'm pretty sure that's a source of a bit, or, a great deal of disgruntlement for Shinobu, but at present I've yet to receive any formal complaints regarding the matter.

For those possessed of an absolute confidence in themselves, maybe the amount of property they own isn't actually much of a problem–well, it might be a problem, but whatever problems might arise, whatever they might lack, as long as they have themselves they're able to deal with it.

Even if they should lose their power.

Even if they should lose that which defines them.

Even then–as long as they have themselves.

"Verily, the road at night be no cause for alarm to one such as I–'tis rather the noonday road with its blazing orb hanging overhead that presents a danger."

She said this to me on the roof of that abandoned building–back when she was not a pseudo-vampire, not the dregs of a vampire nor the shadow of her former self, but a full-fledged vampire.

In other words, back when she was still the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded vampire known as Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

A vampire speaking of the risks of the noonday sun–well, yeah, almost too typical. While people like Mèmè Oshino and that triumvirate of vampire experts were certainly her enemies, never has she had a greater natural enemy than the sun.

So the fact that losing her power paradoxically meant she could now walk around in broad daylight must've been something of an unexpected windfall.

No.

To collect that windfall she'd had to give up something much greater, so it's probably a little weird to talk about it in such positive terms.

"And yet, on the night road, the next step is ever shrouded in darkness–an unseen path. Canst truly call a path unseen a path at all?"

She's said some such thing.

True, for a road to function as a road, it has to be clearly delineated–simply defining it isn't enough.

You know one when you see one seems like an appropriate requirement for a path–if someone told you afterwards that the ground you'd been traversing was in fact this or that road, it'd leave you cold, right?

To put it another way.

So long as you walk with your eyes closed, whatever path you may be on isn't functioning as one–it's just the ground.

It's not a road, no matter how unwavering it might be.

That's precisely why.

The streetlights come on at night.

So you don't lose sight of the road–

Or so you don't encounter aberrations.

"Hmph. Streetlights, thou sayest."

The night hath long since lost its darkness–came the vampire's irritated reply. Well, it's understandable that she'd be irritated, given that a reduction in darkness diminished her territory–it might not be a problem, but her domain was still being invaded.

The dark.

Darkness.

These things are never extinguished. In fact, extinguishment creates the dark and darkness. And yet.

"Of old, 'twas naught but the moon–that illumined the roads at night."

The perfect disc of the moon.

Unfortunately the moon wasn't full that night–nevertheless, she gazed with longing at the sky.

At the night sky, illuminating the night road.

"For reals?!" exclaimed Shinobu, all of a sudden–while I'd had months to get used to her constant use of the phrase, hearing it out of the blue like that still startled me.

It made me cower in confused terror.

The strength of the exclamation made me feel like I was being yelled at. It was clearly a contraction denoting "Is what you're saying really true?" but at this point, it had lost its original meaning, she'd lost sight of it, and she used it as if it meant hello.

Which made me want to ask her if she was for reals, or just prone to exaggeration.

It was December.

The end of the year–the month that my ancestors called "Tutor-Run."

I've heard it was because even sensei got so busy that they ran everywhere, but apparently that's just a folk etymology. I mean, it always made me think, *They run even when it's not the end of the year,* so when Hanekawa told me it was nothing more than folklore, I was plenty satisfied. But that being the case, I still have no idea as to its origins.

And I've never asked.

Maybe that lack of intellectual curiosity is just one of my many faults–but given that we say January jets, February flees, and March makes its getaway, the idea of December running doesn't seem far-fetched enough to warrant comment or question.

Well, regardless of whether or not teachers are busy in December, those of us preparing for our college entrance exams sure as hell are–the national was coming up next month already.

I had very little in the way of free time.

Though if we're being honest, I wasn't swamped solely because of my exam prep. In fact, I had so much to deal with that I would've loved to say forget it, I don't have time for exams, and ditch out on my studies altogether.

But that's easier said than done.

Because even when they know their death is at hand–even when the day of execution has been announced, the sentence handed down, human beings still have to keep on living right up to the bitter end.

To keep on going about their business.

Which is why I was, in fact, spending the day speeding down the home stretch towards my exams–but just as I decided to take a quick break to intake some sugar in between math and Japanese, Shinobu appeared.

With a *For reals?!*

"…Shinobu, 'sup."

That was all the greeting I could muster for the little blond girl who'd come flying out of my shadow to peer intently around the room like a hawk, or a demon.

Shinobu Oshino.

Vampire–ex-vampire.

The king of aberrations–who spends most of her time lurking in my shadow. She was at present a fallen queen, but her brazen attitude was still every inch that of a monarch.

And, since she was by nature a vampire, which is to say nocturnal, even though she'd lost her power, lost sight of her true essence, she basically spent the daylight hours snoozing in my shadow. Yet here she was, awake despite the fact that it was only three in the afternoon.

At this point she seemed less nocturnal or vampire than someone with an unstable lifestyle–what's next, is she gonna tell me mornings still count as nighttime?

Seriously, though, what the hell?

It wasn't the witching hour, it wasn't the dead of night, it was just snack time. She'd show up now?

"Morning."

"Morealsning?!" Shinobu returned my greeting, half-heartedly.

A mash-up of "morning" and "for reals," neologism in action… Things were going to get really out of hand with this verbal tic of hers if the variations started proliferating. And, after peering intently around the room, she finally looked in my direction–

“Mm,” she noticed me. “So there thou art. Hmph, as they say, ’tis truly darkest beneath the lighthouse.”

“Isn’t that a good thing for you?” Pleased at having been inadvertently likened to a lighthouse, a symbol of height, I returned her stare. “Come on. You had trouble finding me?”

“Nay,” Shinobu pointed at me.

No, not at me–at the tray in my hands.

“Be that the source of the odor?”

“Uh, yeah… I figured I should replenish my blood sugar while I was taking a break…”

Resting on the tray I brought up from the kitchen were a plate piled with snacks and a mug filled with black coffee… Did this girl really make the trip out of my shadow just for snack time?

Some vampire.

The behavior of the royal family is sullying the good name of aberrations everywhere.

“If there be no cake, I shall resign myself to eating bread. I have spoken.”

“You’ll ruin your body that way, you know.”

“And yet, I am troubled by how best to treat sweet buns. Be they sweets or be they bread, I cannot say! Tell me, be they staple foods or snacks?”

“Sweet buns are snacks. You can rest easy.”

“And yet sweetbreads are a fitting meal for a vampire indeed–kakak,” Shinobu laughed gruesomely.

Well, the laugh itself was all very picturesque, but it seemed wildly out of place when we were discussing the ontology of dessert with a tray of sweets between us…

“Now, tell me of these snacks. Be they donuts? They must surely be donuts. There can be no doubt of it.”

“Yeah… They’re donuts all right.”

I wasn’t actually as tall as a lighthouse (obviously), but given that Shinobu was currently the height of a little girl, she couldn’t see what was on the tray I was holding.

With those eyes full of delighted anticipation fixed on me, I was frankly at a loss for words. It’s just, if I didn’t properly explain what was going on, it could come back and bite me in the…

“Here’s the thing, Shinobu. They’re donuts, but–”

“Donuts, ye say! Superb!”

Shinobu reached up with both hands.

Just like a child.

It was impossible to detect in that action even a hint of the majesty she once possessed, when she seemed almost twice my height–even with both her hands stuck straight up in the air, she can hardly reach my chin these days.

“I had a premonition that today’s sweets would be donuts! Such unerring intuition! Now then, my master, render those donuts unto me, and not a moment too soon!”

“If it were a moment too soon, it wouldn’t be snack time yet…Anyway, listen for a second, Shinobu.”

Stumped as to how to explain things to an enigmatic little girl who ordered her master to render something unto her, I decided that in this case a picture was indeed worth a thousand words. I

squatted down to her eye-level and placed the tray in question on the floor.

“Wahoo! …Hn?”

For an instant Shinobu’s excitement reached fever pitch, but her expression quickly turned dubious. Her gaze was fixed on the five donuts arranged on the plate atop the tray.

“My lord.”

“What?”

“What are these? Be they the new line from Mister Donut?”

“No, Shinobu. These are called handmade donuts.”

“The new line from Mister Donut which they hath dubbed ‘handmade donuts’?”

“Calling their new product ‘handmade’ would cast undue suspicion on all their other donuts. No, no. You must’ve still been asleep inside my shadow, but Senjogahara just dropped by with these donuts to support the troops.”

“…?”

Shinobu looked completely uncomprehending. If this couldn’t get across to her, what the hell good was our pairing?

“Look, I’m saying that she made these donuts in the kitchen at her house, then brought them over to keep me going while I study,” I tried slightly altering the wording and explaining again–apparently it was going to require a great deal of patience and perseverance to make this clear to her.

That is, I’d known it was going to be like this, which was the whole reason I’d planned to eat them all while Shinobu was still asleep instead of saving them for later…

“Huh? Um, hang on a sec. I’m thinking.”

“You’re talking totally normally. What happened to your old-timey speech?”

Hang on a sec, she says.

Dress it up a little.

“Then, the *tsundere* maiden (18) who counteth herself thy lady love hath–”

“You can leave out the (18) part, (600).”

“I am but (598). I’ll thank thee not to round up.”

“Says someone who was rounding down for, how long?”

“The tsundere maiden (even the most horrible demons were once eighteen)–”

“She’s not horrible, you can’t say that about a person’s girlfriend. Plus you’re the only demon around here.”

We weren’t getting anywhere.

Maybe that was a sign of just how discombobulated Shinobu was–she wasn’t being violent, but that might just be because she was still in shock. If so, I was scared of what lay in store for me. Beyond scared.

“The tsundere maiden hath wrought a counterfeit of Mister Donut? That will not stand, ’tis a crime.”

“They’re not counterfeit. They’re normal, regular donuts. Homemade donuts, the kind which, let’s get real, don’t require all that much expertise.”

If we were going to get even realer, these were donuts that even Senjogahara could make, but I preferred to avoid being so deprecating toward my own girlfriend if I could help it.

“I am yet mystified…”

Shinobu crossed her arms and stared down at the donuts on the plate like an inspector of some sort. Or maybe more like an executioner, her gaze was so intense.

She could bore a hole through you with that look–though, being donuts, they already had them.

“I understand this incident which hath transpired, and yet.”

“Incident? It’s not a crime, okay? My girlfriend just brought me some refreshments, don’t talk about it like it’s some historical affair. It’s literally as banal as could be.”

“Then, in order to bring donuts to bolster my lord’s efforts, the tsundere counterfeiter independently developed donuts in her own domicile, rather than hieing herself to the Mister Donut Shinobu Branch?”

“Developed… Whatever, sure. I mean, your word choice is kind of off, but you’ve got the basic gist.”

I’m not aware of a store called the Mister Donut Shinobu Branch, but since there’s only one Mister Donut in our town, she must be referring to that favorite haunt of hers.

Though as far as she was concerned, it might be more accurate to call it her personal outlet than her favorite haunt…

“Wherefore?” asked Shinobu with a serious expression.

She looked at me with round eyes full of earnest wonder, as if she were asking me why babies were born or why people die, but she was just asking: *Why did Senjogahara make donuts at her own house instead of buying them at the store?*

“Um, I don’t know how to answer that question… To encourage me while I’m studying for exams?”

And also probably to check on me, to make sure I was studying, to make sure I haven’t harmed myself out of despair–though I was

pretty sure the overriding goal was encouragement. But that wasn't what Shinobu was asking.

"I am telling thee 'tis the meaning I do not understand. What is the intention behind troubling thyself to produce that which can be bought?"

"'Intention' might be too strong a word…"

"Buying them would be cheaper, nay?"

"…"

I was getting lectured by an almost six-hundred-year-old vampire about thrift… From a cost performance standpoint, maybe she's right? If we're talking purely about the cost of the ingredients, then maybe homemade would be more economical, but when you factor in the time spent shopping and the hassle of making the donuts–Hitagi Senjogahara's labor costs, in other words–the view that "buying them would be cheaper" wasn't totally wrong…

Still, she just sounded like someone who sucked at household tasks…

"When they have a special offer, 'tis but a hundred yen a donut at Mister Donut. These five donuts would be but five hundred yen. Taxed, 'twould amount to naught but five hundred and twenty-five yen. Five hundred and twenty-five yen, well, verily doth it depend upon thy circumstances, but most would see that as a paltry sum, would they not? Miss Tsundere begrudges even such a meager expenditure?"

"She wasn't begrudging anything… In fact, she took the trouble to make these."

"And what I am asking thee is wherefore would she take that trouble."

Man, was she persistent.

No, calling it persistent makes it sound like a legitimate line of questioning–this was just stubbornness.

“Even should the tax increase to eight percent…let me see, five hundred times eight…”

She began calculating on her fingers.

Sure, eight percent isn’t as easy to calculate as five percent, but I don’t think you can do multiplication on your fingers anyway.

“Feh! I know not! Fie on thy stepwise consumption tax increases, I would have them raise it to ten percent directly!”

“Getting a little ahead of yourself there.”

Sure, it would be a lot easier to calculate.

But I’d be the one paying it, not you.

Taking responsibility for Shinobu, practically speaking, meant providing for a whole other person for the rest of my life, I was beginning to realize.

“Anyway! Without tax ’tis but a single coin! Wherefore would she not pay! Wherefore would she try to pass off these self-serving donuts as our snack!”

Now she was just thinking about it minus my tax burden.

The consumption tax… Well, just because I’ve started not to ignore social studies doesn’t mean I know enough about politics to comment, but that’s one tax that seems inexplicable to me. A tax on consuming things… So then, living, just living, has to cost you?

“But when there isn’t a special offer, one coin wouldn’t be enough even without the tax.”

“Yet do they not have special offers throughout most all the year? I have noted that ’tis in fact the periods without a special offer that seem few and far between.”

“I mean, I don’t think that’s actually true, but…”

But it does seem like that donuttery, that famous chain, is having a hundred-yen sale every time I turn around. I’d be curious to tabulate the actual numbers.

“Speaking of, they were just having a half-off sale, weren’t they…”

Hm.

Speaking of that *speaking of,* it used to be that every single time they’d have a hundred-yen sale, this vampire would whine *take me, take me* (to the point that we once had a chance encounter with the swindler), but she didn’t say much of anything about this most recent half-off sale, did she?

“If they were half off,” I went on, “a rough estimate would be, a little less than three hundred yen for five donuts?”

“Methinks a half-off sale is beyond the pale. I would that they cease selling themselves so cheaply,” Shinobu said with heartfelt emotion.

So that’s why she didn’t press me to take her to the Mister Donut Shinobu Branch during the sale–it wasn’t out of consideration for my studying needs or anything.

“Perhaps ’tis the way of Japan in this day and age to raise the tax while making things cheaper, but behold, I envision the day when that shall make its end. ’Tis needful that the people of this nation come to appreciate that ‘the finer things are costly.’”

“Don’t talk politics. And don’t lament the state of the nation.”

You’re a little blond girl.

And a vampire.

“We must make the people realize that for such things to cost a pittance, so too must someone labor for a pittance.”

“And what I’m saying is, forget a pittance, Senjogahara made these donuts for me for nothing.”

“Eh? My lord, thou hast not paid her?”

“Who’s ever heard of a girlfriend who demands money for bringing her boyfriend a treat?”

“Balderdash… That miser?”

“…”

Senjogahara didn’t exactly have a great reputation.

Considering what happened last month, though, at this point Shinobu Oshino owed Senjogahara her life same as I did…not that this little girl seemed to feel any gratitude for it.

“Have a care, my lord. She may have put something in these donuts.”

“Come on, what kind of a girlfriend do you think I have… If she did put something into them, it was most likely love.”

“Last month thou didst experience firsthand the fact that cooked just so, even love may be transformed to poison, my lord.”

Shinobu cautiously plucked one of the donuts off the plate with a dubious *hmm.*

Exactly the way you’d handle hazardous material.

I bridled at Senjogahara’s home cooking being treated like that, but since I was well aware of the special place donuts occupied in Shinobu’s heart, I had no choice but to overlook her behavior.

She felt about donuts the way Doraemon feels about *dorayaki*–I wonder when they first introduced that into the comic?

“Hrrm. Nothing abnormal about the texture. Though like as not that toxic wench’s artifice would not reveal itself to the touch…”

“Toxic wench… She retired her acid tongue a while ago.”

“Hath it not reemerged of late?”

With another *hmmmm,* Shinobu brought the donut right up to her face and inspected it. She seemed to be using her former-vampire eyesight to visually confirm that there were no abnormalities on its surface. The only thing she’d be able to see would be the sugar it was coated with…

“No, in fact she’s been nothing but sweet lately, up to and including bringing me donuts like this.”

“’Tis only to be expected. All are kind to those whose death draws near.”

“Nobody’s death is drawing near. I’ll take care of it. Somehow. I’d stake my life on it.”

“’Tis that very tendency to stake thy life so readily that hath brought thee to this pass. My master hath not a whit of introspection within him–hm.”

Something in Shinobu’s attitude changed.

That is, she maintained the same severe expression, but the intensity stepped up a notch.

“What of this hole?”

“The hole?”

“’Tis suspect. Like as not she hath used it to inject something into the donut.”

So saying, Shinobu glared up at me–through the hole in the donut.

“…Come on, leave out the tired set-ups. Donuts have holes, that’s the whole point.”

“And why is that?”

“Huh?”

“Aye, till now I have accepted that such is their design, ne’er pondering deeply ’pon the matter, but…wherefore do donuts have holes? Is it not merely a waste of potential donut?”

This time she stuck her finger through the hole and started spinning the donut like a hula hoop.

Treating it so cavalierly just because it wasn’t from Mister Donut–I wanted to tell her not to play with her food.

I may not be well-educated enough to know when Doraemon’s love of dorayaki was introduced, but happily I did know why donuts have holes.

That is, I just found out today. Mere moments ago, in fact.

It was Senjogahara who told me, when she came to drop off the donuts–she was kind enough to lay it out for me when I displayed my ignorance by saying, *Man, you must be a real perfectionist to put the holes in them like this.*

Just to be clear, when I say she was kind enough, I don’t mean that sarcastically. She really did explain it in a generous manner that was easy to understand.

“Shinobu. Donuts with holes in the middle like that are called torus donuts. The hole allows the heat to pass easily and evenly through the whole donut while it’s frying.”

“Thermal efficiency? Is that of what you speak?”

“Yeah, something like that. If there was no hole in the middle, the center wouldn’t fry well. Which is why they remove it.”

Remove might be the wrong word in terms of how they're prepared, but I was putting comprehensibility above all else.

"Ah…is that so?"

"Well? Are you impressed by my erudition?"

"So they call this shape a torus."

"That's the part you're impressed by?"

"What difference be there twixt a ring and a torus?"

"That's a question of volume… A three-dimensional form like a donut or a bagel is called a torus, whereas a ring just means a circle, I think, or…uh…"

"How now, my master. If canst not unravel such a trifling question, how wilt thou penetrate the exam put forth by the National Center?"

Nope.

This kind of question ain't gonna be on the national exam.

"I wonder, is the same true of the hole in a Baumkuchen?"

"No, when they cook a Baumkuchen they stick a pole through the center–Baumkuchen and donuts are made totally differently…"

"And what of donuts that have no holes? How are they fried? Hast said that the heat would not reach to the center. Even Mister Donut maketh many such donuts, yet 'tis not as if they remain uncooked. Thus is the hole not superfluous?"

"I think you're getting a little too deep into their structure… Don't lose sight of your original goal. Which was to inspect these particular donuts."

I looked at the clock. It was already 3:30.

My break was only supposed to be thirty minutes, so I'd already used up my allotment–it's not as if I didn't have some stoppage time factored in, but sadly my plan to enjoy a refined snack of donuts, replenish my blood sugar levels, and rest my mind seemed to have ended in failure.

Well.

Eating five donuts all by myself already seemed like a bit much in any case–so while it did change their purpose somewhat, I'd bring this scene to a close by providing Shinobu with enough donut to shut her up and stop her endless bellyaching.

"Shinobu. Enough with investigating the texture, it's driving me crazy, move on to the flavor already."

"Hm? Eh?"

"I'm saying the only way to find out if it's poisoned is to taste it for poison."

"Art thou telling me to serve as thy poison taster? How cruel my master is, to treat me as the canary in his coalmine! I am speechless!"

Even as she said this, Shinobu's expression relaxed.

In an instant she was all a-sparkle.

To put it in anime terms, the marks on her cheeks got more pronounced–her eyes were glittering.

"Being thus treated by thee suffuses me with warmth, my lord! Aye, like a well-fried donut!"

"Trying to make it clever just makes it more complicated… Now eat up. Eat up and shut up."

Hopefully she'd keep quiet at least while she was chewing the damn things–as her guardian I had no intention of teaching her that it's okay to talk with your mouth full.

I mean, even supposing Senjogahara had poisoned these donuts, these provisions for the troops, that wouldn't be an issue for Shinobu–sea bream even when it's gone bad, as the expression goes, likewise for a drained vampire.

Someone who could gobble up a pair of iron handcuffs without batting an eyelash wasn't going to die from a little thing like a poisoned donut.

"Now now, be not hasty, my lord. I warn thee, assume not that I shall eat anything so long as it may be called a donut. If thou thinkest one donut made by some nameless peasant can placate me, thou art gravely mistaken. If dost wish to slip the net of my investigation, wouldst do well to hie thee straightaway to yon Mister Donut Shinobu Branch and procure for me the new Pon de Ring Rare Choco Golden. Canst even believe it? The Pon de Ring Rare alone would be revolutionary, yet also have they made it in the form of a golden chocolate donut. How high might they fly, will they continue to heap glory upon glory? I have yet to taste the thing, but even as I envision it, 'tis as though the flavor fills my mouth. Aye, before all and sundry, surely I shall cry out at this donut of Japan *for reals?!*"

Cry out, she did.

Her cry cut off her discourse, so despite her earlier lamentations on the state of our economy, it came out sounding like a triumphant shout extolling our nation.

I should note at this point that my sweetheart Hitagi Senjogahara is anything but a good cook–or more accurately, she has somehow managed to live thus far without utilizing kitchens for the most part.

Her sickly elementary school years, her middle school years of relentless study, and her high school years spent in the clutches of an aberration–make no mistake, she was a model student throughout all of it, but she never seems to have gotten around to working on her cooking–though that said, or maybe nevertheless, now that her aberration problem has been dealt with for the moment, she seems to have carved out the space to pursue "everything else"–those fields that she had seen as extraneous; so while her progress may be baby steps, her skill in that regard does seem to be on an upward trajectory.

To be honest, the five donuts lined up on the plate were of wildly varying size and shape, diverse you might say, or uneven, or mismatched, a real motley crew. From their outward appearance it wasn't surprising that Shinobu might be wary of them, but when it came to their flavor, they apparently received a passing grade from the famous donut critic Shinobu Oshino.

After all, she did cry out *for reals?!*

Cutting off her discourse.

If Mister Donut's "Pon de Ring Rare Choco Golden" (whose nature remains unfathomable to me, never having seen one) gets three Michelin stars, maybe this garnered at least one?

"The lass hath done it! I had ever thought that one day she might do something, but to think that today is that day!"

"I'm pretty sure that day was the second of last month, when she saved both our lives…"

"Hmm! I have yet to truly sink my teeth into the study of the donut, yet I know enough to hail this as a great achievement!"

"Seems like sinking your teeth into it would be the only way to go about it…"

Then again, she had sunk her teeth into no small number of donuts.

So it really had to be something special.

“’Tis well done! Summon Miss Tsundere! I would praise her in person!”

“Come on…‘my compliments to the chef’?”

Since we were talking about donuts, strictly speaking maybe it was her compliments to the pastry chef.

Hmmm.

Well, naturally they weren’t poisoned, but I’d accepted them to savor the sentiment more than the flavor, so I was genuinely pleased to see Shinobu, cream smeared all around her mouth, praising them to the skies like that.

Not that I’d done anything myself, of course.

“But, after having basically avoided contact with Senjogahara this whole time, you can’t possibly feel compelled to face her because of some donuts.”

“I wish to apologize to her for having called her Miss Tsundere heretofore. Even if I cannot yet call her Mister Donut, I think it meet to dub her Master Donut.”

“That’s a hell of a thing to dub someone…”

Isn’t that a little over the top?

That’s not just high praise, it feels like it’s shading into sarcasm–given that Senjogahara was still at the “The adventure begins!” stage with cooking in general, it seemed frankly dubious for this deep-fried pastry alone to receive such a high evaluation.

People say that pastries are harder to make than anything on the menu of our so-called three square meals… You can’t wing it with

pastries, where the measurements and timing demand a level of precision far surpassing other kinds of cooking. Oh, hmm, could that be it?

I think I get it.

A convincing theory formed in my mind–knowing Senjogahara, something that demands precision might actually be easier for her. Relying on instructions and instruments instead of her own palate, she would be less likely to make a careless mistake. Maybe that was the logic here.

And with fried pastries you can't even taste them until they're basically done… Only the shape rested on the sensibilities of the chef, which explained the chaos in that department.

"…"

That was just according to logic.

Maybe the truth is that Senjogahara's distinctive palate and Shinobu's unique one just happened to line up.

Now I needed to taste my sweetheart's homemade donuts for myself–I thought, reaching out to take one.

But Shinobu snatched away the donut I had my eye on, along with the whole plate.

"…Hunh? What're you doing?"

"What art *thou* doing, my lord? The poison tasting is not yet complete."

"No, it is. You already went ahead and ate one, and you said it tasted good."

"'Tis yet too early to say. It could be a slow-acting poison. A slow-acting but mortal poison," Shinobu warned.

Her mouth was slathered with cream and sugar, but the words emanating from it were vigilant.

I thought about cleaning off those messy lips with a kiss.

Not that I actually did, mind you.

“Though it be safe for the moment, it might prove the type of poison to extend its malign influence to thy descendants, my lord.”

“No, if Senjogahara poisoned me like that, she’d be screwing her own descendants.”

“Pshaw, be not certain that thy house shall flourish with Miss Tsundere.”

“…”

Well.

Given my current situation.

Maybe I ought to stop running away from reality and start considering how to save Senjogahara, even if I can’t save myself.

As for Shinobu, though…it might come down to a double suicide.

“Hence I shall dig in my heels about continuing the poison inspection.”

“Dig in your heels? Should that be head over heels?”

“Nay, leave the matter entirely in my hands! Four more samples for comparative analysis should be enough to yield the answer.”

“Four? Shinobu-tan, from what I can see there are exactly four donuts left in the clip.”

“Is that so? What a coincidence. Just what the doctor ordered.”

“More like made to order. That’s how you came up with that number. Now hand over the plate.”

“Impossible. As thy valet, my lord, ’tis my duty to protect thee from even the most insignificant risk.”

“You can’t play the valet only when it suits you!”

Play the valet.

Hell of a ring to it, especially for something I came up with on the spot.

“Hand over the plate.”

I tried saying it again, but Shinobu was clutching the plate to her and showed no signs of letting it go. Well, strictly speaking she wasn’t clutching it to her–she was holding it loosely in one hand.

As a ruse, naturally.

One false move on my part could overturn the entire plate; she’d brought us to an obvious stalemate.

If I tried to take it by force, all four donuts would end up on the floor, and we’d be left with nothing–having lost her power as a vampire, all she could rely on was her wiles. Tough luck for me.

“This is my final warning. Shinobu. Hand over that plate right now.”

“Kakak. Thou art a poor negotiator,” she scoffed, her grip on the donuts precarious at best, “with thine uncompromising attitude, thy single-minded insistence: *give it to me, hand it over.* Is that not the very reason that the talisman entrusted to thee by the ringleader of those experts was stolen?”

“Urk.”

I mean.

Absolutely.

But was that really something to be talking about in the same breath as this tug-of-war over some donuts? Consider the dire situation that I am in, that you are in–not to mention others around us who've gotten roped in thanks to the theft.

"If thou hadst acquitted thyself more admirably in that parley, we would not be in such grave circumstance. Thy level of introspection leaves much to be desired."

"…"

I feel like there's no arguing with anything anyone has to say to me about that case, but at the same time, you're the last person in the world I want to hear it from.

Sure, I was careless, but you were pretty goddamn careless yourself.

"Nay, I speak to thee in all earnestness." The little blond girl with a plate of donuts in one hand, who was apparently speaking to me in all earnestness, puffed out her chest and continued in a haughty tone. "In order that such a tragedy not befall thee a second time, my lord, I prithee take heed of the lessons learned from the accumulated days of thy life. Dost truly think that if thou canst not win me over here, 'tis still possible that ye might win over the snake god?"

"Nnnn…"

Well.

What can I say to that?

Obviously I'm going to try and avoid this tragedy–but if that's so obvious, then she's right, I'd better start thinking about what comes after.

Because if my subpar diplomacy really was to blame for the mess, that's a flaw I need to overcome. I'm not going to acquire Oshino's

eloquence and skill at bridge-building negotiation overnight, of course–but if I can't do it overnight, all the more reason to work at it every day, like now…

"Nay, thy logic is skewed."

"Feh. You noticed?"

"Didst imagine I wouldn't?"

"Why should I need to be some master negotiator just to keep you from eating my donuts? Just give them to me. Give them back. If I insist on it, just hand them over. This is a purely private affair, it doesn't involve anyone but us."

"The matter of the snake god is also a private affair, though, is it not?"

"Last time I warned you, I told you that was it, but I'll say it just one more time out of the goodness of my heart. Out of single-minded insistence. Shinobu, hand over that plate."

"If 'tis naught but the plate thou desirest, then I have no objection."

"Naught but, my ass."

"Once poison hast ate, finish the plate, as they say. I shall eat the donuts, and my lord shall eat the plate. It seems a fair apportioning to me."

"Not only is it as unfair as it could get, you're still presuming that Senjogahara's donuts are poisoned. Cut the shit already."

We hadn't been on the same page for a while now. I figured our relationship would be a long one, but some intertribal barriers were proving more difficult to overcome than I'd expected.

Shinobu apparently felt the same way, because she made no attempt to hide a drawn-out sigh of discouragement.

She might as well have held up a sign that said, *I'm disappointed in you.*

Well, we were on the same page about that, at least, but most of the time it felt like we weren't even reading the same book.

"In my estimation, thou hadst already failed the moment didst reveal these donuts to me. Thou wouldst have done better to eat such as these before I could discover them. To eat them in secret without waking me. If hadst done so, this pointless trouble would have been avoided."

"You're the one causing this pointless trouble… Talk about a problem neighbor."

There was absolutely no way I was going to be eating these without being noticed by my neighbor, that is, by you down there in my shadow–what could I do, if the smell alone was enough to wake you up.

"Mm, in that case…before we work on thy negotiation skills, my lord, perhaps 'twould be best to polish thy flair for secrecy."

"Secrecy?"

"Aye, if hadst been more adept in secreting that talisman, 'twould never have reached the stage of negotiation, and we would not now be brought to such dire straits. 'Twas the fact that thou didst secrete the talisman in such an easily found place which gave rise to this tragedy."

"Uh…well, it's not like I can't see where you're coming from."

Maybe the whole problem is that I engage in this kind of discussion in the first place. Could my lack of skill at negotiation stem from the fact that I actually listen to what other people have to say?

"But you agree that finding a place to hide it was a problem, right? I mean, being handed that kind of, well, weapon…"

Handed.

Or more like backhanded.

“Letting it out of my sight was risky, but carrying it around with me was even riskier… Ultimately, I don’t see what else I could’ve done but hide it in a place like that.”

“Yet is that not why ’twas found so easily, o he who if he were a tarot card would be the Fool?”

“Why go to all the trouble of bringing the tarot card part into it? Calling me a plain old fool would be just as good.”

Though it wouldn’t be good.

You think a college hopeful is going to take that lying down?

“Were I a tarot card, wouldst be the Moon.”

“No, I’m pretty sure the tarot deck already has the Devil or Death or something. Wouldn’t that be more like a vampire?”

“I am the Moon. The proof lies in the fact that, had it been me, the talisman would have found a fitting hiding place. As would these donuts. Know thou, my lord, that thy present circumstance is entirely of thine own foolish making!”

“…”

Man, she pisses me off.

At the same time, if you can’t turn a blind eye to your own shortcomings, maybe you don’t survive as long as she has.

Last time she couldn’t do it, she tried to kill herself, after all.

As for my present circumstances, even if we had to wait and see if our measures against the snake god would pay off–if I didn’t resolve the donut issue soon, I was never going to get my exam prep back on track.

This was something of a critical moment.

“Go ahead and tell me then, Shinobu. Forget about the talisman for a sec–if it were you, how would you have kept the donuts secret?”

“’Tis difficult to put into words. Hm, easier said than done, they say, but aye, perhaps ’twould instead be easier in this instance to show thee than to tell thee of it. Avail me of but five minutes, and I shall make these donuts disappear from before thine eyes like magic. Thou shalt never find them.”

“Five minutes… No, hang on, five minutes is plenty of time for you to eat four donuts. It’s absolutely against the rules to eat them then say, ‘Look, they’re gone.’”

And of course it would be against the rules to hide them in my shadow–if I had that kind of method at my disposal, not only would I have been able to hide the talisman, you never would’ve known about these donuts.

“Kakak. Dost truly think I would be so duplicitous?”

“You? Definitely.”

Holding Senjogahara’s donuts hostage was already pretty underhanded.

“Perhaps I cannot keep all four from thee–but one or two, at least, I shall hide such that they never be found. What sayest thou, dost fancy a challenge? Canst find in five minutes that which I take five minutes to hide?”

“…”

“The rule shall be that any donuts thou dost not find, I may consume. Should my lord find all four, it shall be his right to eat all four.”

“Hm…”

I wasn't wild about the idea of gambling for donuts that were mine to begin with, that is, if she didn't look like a little girl, I'd have an overwhelming urge to smack her…but in order to get back to my exam prep as soon as possible, I had no choice but to go along with it.

"All right, I'm in. But let me repeat, eating them doesn't count as hiding them, okay? You can't hide them in your stomach, okay?"

"Aye, aye, 'tis understood. Nor shall I hide them in my cleavage."

"You're a little girl, you don't have cleavage."

More likely she'd hide two by stuffing her bra with them–though that would still leave two more.

"If you tried it anyway, there would be the problem of how to recover them… I mean, if you eat them behind my back, it'll be too late no matter what I say."

"Thou hast too little faith in me."

"Right, here's what we'll do: I'm adding a rule that if you do something illegal, the punishment will be that I stick my hand down your throat and make you throw up."

"I shall break no rule, so thou mayest invent whatever punishment pleases thee, my lord, but dost intend to eat any donuts that I might throw up?"

She was acting horrified.

Don't look at me that way, I'm your partner in crime, we're in the same boat, our lives are inextricably linked.

"But Shinobu, there's one other problem. A practical problem, it's got nothing to do with preventing you from cheating."

"Namely?"

“You’re bound to my shadow, right? So isn’t it going to be pretty hard for you to hide something so it’s hidden from me?”

Hide something so it’s hidden is a weird phrase, but–when her only territory was my shadow, I didn’t see how she could hide anything from me if I wasn’t asleep. Even if I was asleep. There had been a period when our pairing, or tethering, had been severed, but…

“Well, I guess I can just close my eyes…for five minutes, or until you say you’re ready.”

“Nay, for if thou dost break thy promise and open thine eyes, the game is ruined. Thou wilt surely open them a little. Rejected. Dost the nincompoop think I have so much faith in him?”

“…Seeing as how up in arms you were about me doubting you a minute ago, don’t you think you should take it down a notch?”

“As punishment for such a transgression I shall, let me see, I shall stick my hand into thine eye socket and gouge out thine eye.”

“Take it down a notch!!”

“Well, if that be out of bounds, then there is nothing left but to employ a blindfold,” said Shinobu Oshino, readily taking off her leggings.

“Huh? You’re doing what, Araragi?”

“No, Hanekawa. The thing is…”

“Any way that anybody slices anything, this is no time for you to be doing that. How can you be playing around with Shinobu?”

“No, I mean, I totally agree, that’s exactly what I thought–”

“You know perfectly well that you need to be studying for your exams right now, Araragi.”

“…”

That’s what you meant?

I mean, sure, that too, I guess.

“Using leggings as a blindfold? Pervert.”

She let me have it, point blank.

Not gonna forget that one anytime soon.

“Let me explain, Hanekawa. It’s not like I wanted to be blindfolded with leggings. Blindfolding me with leggings, stuffing leggings in my mouth, it was all Shinobu.”

“In your mouth?”

“Slip of the tongue.”

Should’ve left them stuffed in my mouth.

No?

“H-Hanekawa. I’m sure there’s a whole heap of things you want to lecture me about, but international calls are expensive, aren’t they? You probably can’t–”

“Don’t worry. I can.”

“…? Oh, well, in that case there’s something I want to ask you. Where do you think Shinobu hid the donut?”

“That’s what you want to ask me? Not about my search for Mister Oshino?”

“We’ll get to that later.”

“Amazing. You’re quite a guy.”

“Ooh, appealing to my vanity, are we?”

“Your inability to recognize sarcasm is even more amazing.”

“I found three of the donuts she hid, but I couldn’t find the last one–we’re talking about just my room. There are only so many places she could’ve hidden it.”

“Hmmm.”

“So all I can think of is that she ate it… Though given everything she said, I have a hard time believing she would’ve broken that rule.”

“That does seem like the most likely possibility–but it sounds like you have faith that she wouldn’t cheat. In which case I guess she must’ve gone with the second most likely possibility.”

“The second most likely? You mean I overlooked something?”

“How come you have faith in Shinobu but not in yourself… If it’s me, I’d say the likelihood that you’ve overlooked something in your own room is pretty low, Araragi.”

“Wow. Your confidence in me is pretty high, Hanekawa!”

“A low likelihood isn’t the same thing as high confidence.”

“…”

Harsh.

Hanekawa is harsh on perverts… No, most people would be.

“Then what’s this second most likely possibility?”

“What happened to the three donuts you did find, Araragi?”

“I ate them. That was the deal. Which means that me and Shinobu shared the donuts in a 3:2 ratio.”

“Were they good?”

“Yeah, just like Shinobu said. Is that…important?”

“Nope, the flavor is irrelevant. I was just thinking how much I’d like to taste Senjogahara’s handiwork as a pastry chef–4:1.”

“Huh?”

“It’s 4:1, the donut ratio. The sharing ratio. You ate four of them, Araragi.”

“? No, I only ate three…”

“*The fourth donut was hidden inside one of the other three*–they say if you want to hide a tree, do it in the forest, but in this case, the tree was hidden inside another tree, so to speak.”

“…”

“You said the donuts were all different sizes, right? Then she must’ve taken the smallest of the four remaining ones and hidden it inside the biggest one.”

“Wha… But how? Hiding a tree inside another tree…”

“Hiding a tree inside another tree would be impossible without hollowing it out. But you could do it with a fried donut. Since the inside is soft, whatever the outside might be like. All it would take would be a good squeeze.”

“Squeeze… B-But.”

Sure, but.

“Even if the inside is soft, the outside is hard, okay? You’d know if someone tried that trick–”

“Not with a torus donut. Look, Araragi, after Shinobu ate the first one *her face was covered in cream*–isn’t that what you said? Which means Senjogahara used whipped cream in the donuts. But since they were torus donuts, it’s unlikely that the pastry was completely wrapped around the filling like with curry bread, you know? Either the outside was decorated with cream, or the torus was split horizontally like a bagel and the cream was put in between the two halves. Either scenario would jibe with your testimony about the way Shinobu was holding the donut. The former clashes with your stated

testimony that the outside was sprinkled with sugar, however, leaving us with only the latter possibility–”

“…”

Information leaking out of every word I said to her.

You’re scary, Miss Hanekawa.

“And if it’s the latter, then the donuts *were split from the start,* so there was no need for Shinobu to deal with the hard exterior at all. The cream probably acted as an adhesive once it was put inside the donut, I imagine? Though all that being said…there’s no proof, is there. Since you ate the proof, Araragi.”

In a certain sense, you could even say that Shinobu hid the donut in your *stomach*–finished Hanekawa.

Hm…

Is that why Shinobu wouldn’t squeal about where she hid the last donut, no matter how much I grilled her? That would be hard to admit, wouldn’t it, both that she had resorted to that kind of trickery to conceal Senjogahara’s donut, and that she sat silently by and let me eat it as a means of destroying the evidence.

I unconsciously threw a look of reproach at my shadow, but I felt embarrassed. I’d gobbled up the double donut with gusto, not noticing any difference from the other two, never realizing the trick that had been played on me…

Maybe that was why Hanekawa asked me about the flavor–and not because she wanted to hear more about her friend Senjogahara’s skill as a pastry chef.

I dunno, I was struck by the feeling that I needed to refine my own palate before I could say anything about Senjogahara’s skill in the kitchen.

“Sorry, but…I think that’s bullshit.”

“Bullshit? How come, it’s not like she broke the rules. Shinobu didn’t eat the donut herself, after all.”

“No, it’s definitely bullshit–her goal was to eat the donuts, right? But if she set it up so that I would eat them, then everything’s topsy-turvy. She didn’t accomplish her goal at all–”

“That’s the point, Araragi.”

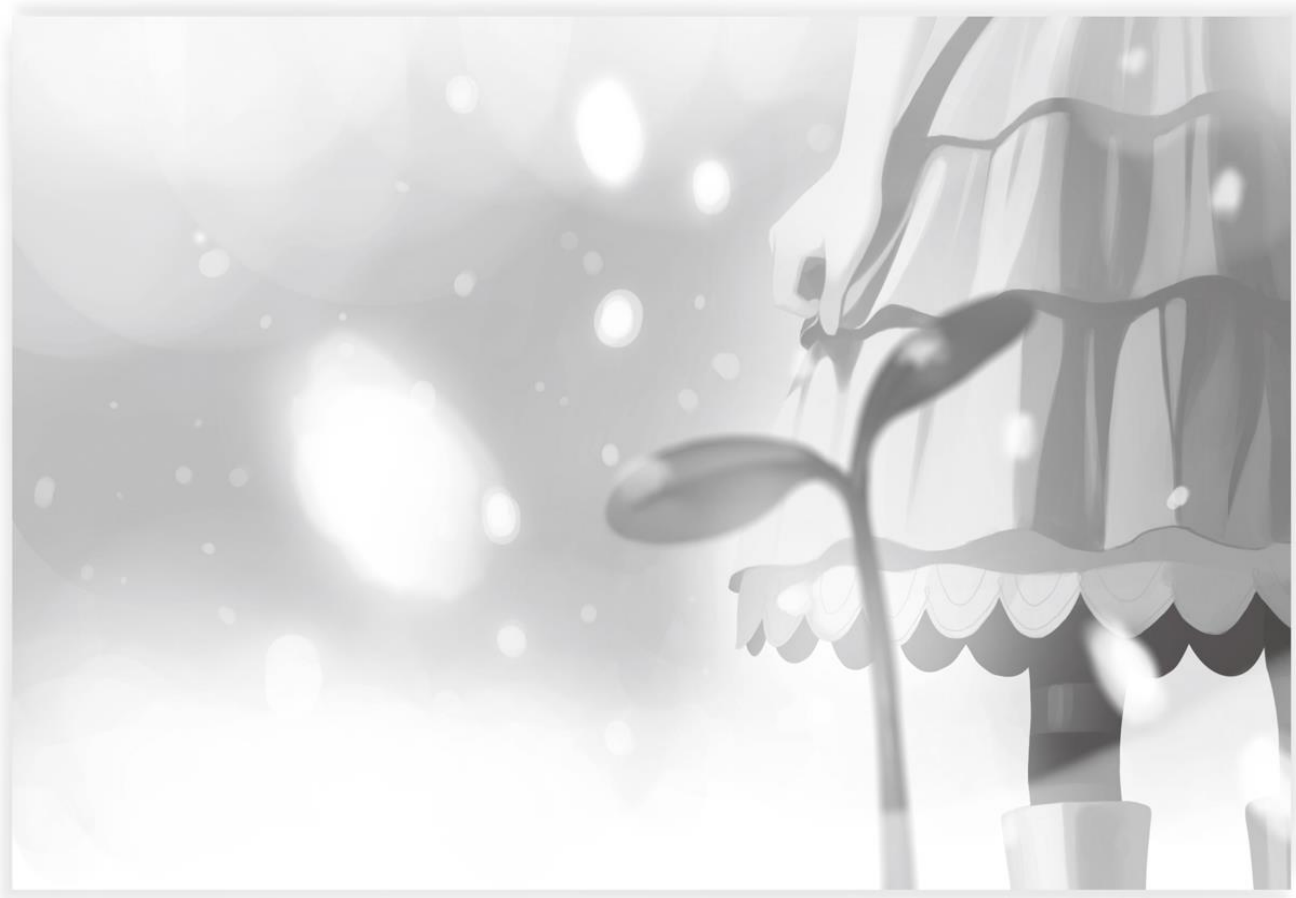
“Huh?”

“Abandoning your own interests, your own goals. Setting aside your personal judgment. In other words, being selfless, self-sacrificing. That’s the point. That’s what Shinobu was trying to teach you.”

“The point…of negotiations? Of secrecy?”

“Of love.”

CHAPTER TEN
KOYOMI SEED



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1
January

I wonder if Yotsugi Ononoki even makes a distinction between roads and everything else? I consistently have my doubts–she's bound by neither the forces of gravity, nor buoyancy, nor lift. The creatures known as human beings who're always bustling around her generally propel themselves by alternately moving one leg and then the other, and I can't help but think that Yotsugi Ononoki is simply emulating them when she does so herself.

At present the human race just so happens to have adopted perambulation as its primary form of locomotion, and she's just imitating them, no deeper meaning or consideration involved. If, for instance, crawling were to become the latest trend in human propulsion, Yotsugi Ononoki would probably start crawling around without a second thought.

According with reason holds no meaning for her–it's adapting to reality that's much more meaningful.

And that adaptation to reality is itself an absolutely goal-oriented way of life for a *shikigami* like Yotsugi Ononoki–then again, since she's an aberration who doesn't possess a lifeforce and can't be said to have a way of life in the first place, and is in fact relentlessly pursuing a goal she can never achieve, maybe it's more like a meaningless way of punishing herself.

"For me, the safest way to travel isn't walking along the ground or soaring through the sky–it's probably burrowing through the earth."

Some time or other.

When I was going along, being taken along, on a high-altitude trip fueled by her "Unlimited Rulebook"–it's really up to the observer whether to consider that mode of travel jumping or flying–she suddenly started explaining this to me.

In a monotone that sounded like a failed impersonation.

Lacking intonation.

Or even context.

“Tunneling through the earth like a mole–I think that’s probably the safest way for me to travel.”

Unless she was just making a groundless joke about *being* underground versus *going* underground, I couldn’t even guess at what she was trying to say.

Safe.

Sure, being underground is probably safe.

Especially for someone like her, someone for whom battle is inevitable, an indispensable safety might well be found there.

There–beneath the earth.

She might find a safety that the surface doesn’t afford her.

After all, in that kind of hermetically sealed environment there’s no fear of a surprise attack, even from above–given the lack of obstructions in the sky, aerial movement naturally allows for the greatest velocity, but a lack of obstructions also means a lack of potential cover.

Which is why Yotsugi Ononoki said that subterranean travel was the safest–or so I thought, but she just quietly shook her head at my interpretation.

Shook her head expressionlessly.

And said in a monotone, “No. It’s because there are no people around.”

No people around.

There was no one for her to imitate, hence no one to be influenced by.

It was the one place she could really be herself.

“Oh. Kind monster sir. Monstieur for short. What a coincidence, running into you like this. Yaaay.”

“…”

“Hey now, what’s with the cold shoulder? That sort of behavior’s no good for my moral education. How are you going to explain it to Big Sis if I end up as a delinquent, yaaay.”

“…”

I turned on my heel and started back the way I’d come, but Ononoki zipped around in front of me so fast that she was just a blur, tenaciously maintaining her sideways peace sign like I was a television camera or something. This may not be a nice thing to say about a girl you’re friends with, but the fact is that I had no patience for it right then.

Patently no patience.

Please don’t misunderstand me.

It’s not Ononoki that I had no patience for–sure, I couldn’t hide the fact that I was a little fed up with her “yaaay sideways peace sign,” wherever she might’ve picked it up, but my feelings towards Yotsugi Ononoki, this shikigami aberration, this *tsukumogami* employed and commanded by an expert, were generally positive.

And the ignominious nicknames she gave me–kind monster sir, monstieur, and so forth–had to do with my vampiric nature. It wasn’t that I treated her monstrously–be kind to young girls.

That’s my motto.

And yet, if running into someone you don’t want to run into at an inopportune time is the worst-case scenario, what do you call running into someone you do want to run into at an inopportune

time? And the current time was, indeed, inopportune. My patience was exhausted.

Specifically.

It was the middle of January.

I was on my way home from the national exam–for the second day in a row, I had gone to the test center, filled up the scantron sheet, and taken the train back to my town.

Having walked Senjogahara to her place, I was now on my way home–and just about halfway between our houses, I bumped into this girl.

The timing seemed just a little too good, it felt like I'd been ambushed; but while I might have a reason to ambush Ononoki, I couldn't think of a good reason why she might ambush me, so it was probably just happenstance. No question about it.

"Hey, what're you doing, Monstieur?"

"Hm?"

"Hey, hello, over here," Ononoki beckoned with a twitch of her two fingers.

Or no, not beckoned–I'm pretty sure she was urging me to do *something* with that gesture, but body language is a means of linguistic expression that only works when it's based on a certain level of mutual comprehension.

Mutual comprehension is difficult with an aberration even at the best of times, and Ononoki lacks facial expressions in the bargain–to put it in kanji terms, she was a difficult and obscure character, not part of the standard list.

In other words, unreadable.

"Yaaay."

“Come on, enough with the sideways peace sign. I have enough trouble reading it as it is, don’t make it any more complicated.”

“Oh man. Everyone and their mother gives me a hard time about my sideways peace sign.”

“Everyone and their mother? Did someone besides me complain to you about it? Who was it?”

“That’s a secret.”

“A secret?”

“Obviously. Why would I tell you anything? Know your place.”

“…”

What the hell.

Sure, I may’ve accidentally strayed into her private affairs, but why shut me down so forcefully…

“Let’s get to know each other’s places.”

“Each other’s? You and me? That’s, well, that’s a surprisingly ardent approach, but…”

“You see, this body language. This hand gesture,” she started to explain, as if she thought we weren’t going to get anywhere otherwise.

Well, I was the one thinking that.

But the gesture she now gesticulated struck me as completely different from her earlier body language… Was this doll just doing whatever popped into her head?

“Means ‘I’m on a bit of a hunt for something, and if you happen to have the time, I wonder if you wouldn’t mind helping me look for it, Monstieur.’”

“How would anyone know that?!”

You can’t express such a complicated request with only two fingers!

I’m not a telepath!

“Telepath? Don’t you mean Derepath?”

“What does that even mean? Is it supposed to be a variation on tsundere?”

“So, what about it? Are you going to help me or not? Tell me now. If you don’t want to help me, then hurry up and get out of my sight.”

“…”

Her word choice…

Her tone…

Who the hell was giving this girl her moral education–though, the influence of others has a much more direct effect on Ononoki than it does on other aberrations.

She must be hanging out with the wrong crowd–this tween really embodies the expression “If you lie down with dogs, you’ll get up with fleas.”

For crying out loud, be a little choosier about your friends–not that I’m one to talk. I haven’t exactly been hanging out with the best crowd myself lately.

“I’d love to help you, but…”

On a hunt, huh.

Did we really just happen to run into each other while Ononoki was out looking for something? Even so…

“I just finished my exam, and I’m wiped out–Senjogahara made me go over my answers with her at her house afterwards, and it got ugly.”

That’s what I meant by inopportune–it wasn’t just an inopportune time to run into Yotsugi Ononoki, I didn’t feel like running into anybody, didn’t feel like talking to anybody at all.

What I needed to do was get myself home as quickly possible, review the questions I’d gotten wrong, and get a handle on the areas that were giving me trouble–I was in such a hurry that even stopping to talk with Ononoki for this long felt like I was wasting precious time, never mind going on some treasure hunt.

“Your exam? Ohhh. You mean that National Center Exam you were telling me about before. Back in my day, it was called the Common First-Stage Exam.”

“Um, why’s a tween spouting a stale line people of a certain age supply on cue?”

I really gotta find out whose influence this is.

“It used to be called ‘First-Stage’ but now it’s ‘Center’? What kind of a name change is that? It’s a total turnaround. Maybe there was just some issue with the naming rights.”

“That’s some issue, in its own way!”

“They use that scantron sheet thing, right? I know all about that. Ahem. Yaaay.”

“…”

Pretty impressive, except it was probably thanks to me. I seem to recall mentioning it when I was “telling her about it before.”

“What’s the big deal, then? The exam’s over, right? Why are you acting like you’re in such a rush? I don’t have time for your *I’m so busy* routine, Monstieur.”

“Um, I’m not doing any routine.”

Or did I start acting that way without realizing it?

Reassuring myself that I hadn’t, I said, “To put it bluntly, my scantron sheet results were pretty disgraceful. It’s looking like I’m gonna need to give myself an extra boost from here on out.”

“Hmmm… Well, that just goes to show what a warrior you are, Monstieur. No filling in the tough ones on a hunch for you. Me, I’d take a gamble on one-in-five odds, but you just leave that blank space pure and unsullied.”

“’Fraid not.”

Nothing upright and unsullied about me.

More like down and dirty.

How else would I be shamelessly going about my life after experiencing the kind of year I have?

“The thing is, my hunches are no good. Every single time I gambled on those one-in-five odds, I got it wrong.”

“Yaaay. I mean, wow.”

Her reaction and her catchphrase came out of order.

And what kind of a catchphrase is that, anyway?

“Amazing. I said one in five, but with a little bit of studying you should be able to reduce the odds to one in three or even one in two. What the hell have you been doing this past year to get them all wrong? You’d be better off dead.”

“…”

Why so harsh?

I should be asking *you* who the hell you’ve been hanging out with since the last time I saw you.

“This past year I’ve mainly been getting attacked by a vampire and beaten half to death by a cat, dealing with girls falling on me or losing her way, getting my ass kicked by a monkey, being enwrapped by a snake, and duped by a swindler, watching my little sisters become targets, traveling through time, getting attacked by darkness, and told that I only have six months left to live. When exactly should I have been studying? Dammit.”

“I’m not saying you should have been studying, I’m saying you’d be better off dead.”

“Don’t you try and kill me, at least.”

“I’m going to keep on berating you until you agree to help out with my search. I’m going to keep on telling you to drop dead.”

“Don’t. Because I won’t feel like helping you.”

“You won’t?”

“Will I?”

“You’re a will-I son of a bitch.”

“Is that supposed to be like a wily son of a bitch? Clumsy, but fine, fine.”

I raised my hands in surrender.

Unlike Ononoki’s earlier gesture, this was the clearest possible body language.

“I give up, I’ll help out, will-I-ngly. So this thing you’re looking for. It’s around here?”

“Who knows, it might not be.”

“…”

How irritating.

Not even a word of thanks?

True, it’d be more efficient to hurry up and locate whatever she was looking for as soon as possible then bid her a peaceable farewell, rather than stand around bandying words like this.

Instead of worrying later on about how things turned out for her, I could take care of this problem on the spot–that seemed like the best way to move ahead with my exam prep.

…

Wasn’t precisely this sort of stopgap mentality whittling away all my study time, though? Like, *it’ll be more efficient in the end if I clean my room before I start studying.*

Well, either way, that ship had sailed–it was too late to change my mind and just head home. To begin with, Ononoki had her “Unlimited Rulebook” as a last resort.

With that, it’d be a cinch to make me do anything she wanted–and submitting before the other person busts out the big guns is how you survive in this world.

A magic bullet against the big guns.

I guess that’s not badass, no matter how badass I try to make it sound…

“Well, if you say it might not be around here, then we’ll have to bear that in mind. So, what should I be looking for?”

“Hmm, good question.”

“…”

“Yaaay.”

“…Yaaay.”

Just let me go home alreadaaay…

Ultimately, it came to pass that I joined Ononoki on her search still ignorant of what it was we were searching for–Nadeko Sengoku had looked for an “object of worship,” but this was even more open-ended. How did I let myself get suckered into it? Yet I had, and that was that.

I couldn’t get anything more out of her no matter how hard I pressed.

That is, Ononoki herself only seemed to have the vaguest idea–and tried to gloss over that point, but while we hadn’t known each other for very long, we knew each other pretty well.

From her statement “Apparently it’ll be instantly recognizable,” I could see that someone else had ordered her to find this thing, and that she herself was operating on only the vaguest intel.

See, or rather, hear… An ordinary person, under ordinary circumstances, couldn’t look for something based on information so vague it was accompanied by an “apparently,” but I suppose it was more or less par for the course for a familiar.

A mission with an unknown objective, a search with an unknown target.

As an expendable asset belonging to an expert, maybe she wasn’t permitted to question her owner–but anyway.

Despite not being owned by anyone or ordered not to ask questions, I ended up joining this ill-informed search party.

It was almost like I was a familiar myself–and I wasn’t being used by an expert but by a shikigami, so go figure.

Where I stood, in this scenario.

“I’d pretty much finished a creep around this area–I was just thinking I should try looking somewhere else when I ran into you.”

“I see… Too bad.”

If I'd only taken the next train, I could've avoided this whole encounter? This just wasn't my day.

"Oh, and just to be clear, when I said 'a creep,' I wasn't talking about you, okay?"

"Why would you be?"

"As far as the search goes, the thing I want you to help me with…" she went on as if I hadn't said anything.

It's a breach of etiquette to play dumb and ignore a retort like that. Or maybe she never ratified that treaty? Or she wasn't talking about me, but she does think I'm a creep?

"Is expanding my field of vision."

"Your field of vision?"

"I hit a dead end–and started to think I needed to change my perspective."

"Well, I mean, start thinking whatever you want, but if it has something to do with me, could you clarify what it is you want me to do? Are you basically saying that when you're searching for something, the more eyes the better?"

"I wonder, what would be better?"

"Stop answering my questions like that. Setting my teeth on edge doesn't even begin to cover it."

"Oh? Then what is it setting? An event flag, like in a dating sim?"

"No flags are getting set with a girl as young as you."

"A flag is like a banner, right? So setting a flag means raising a banner…but is it a battle standard, or are we surrendering? Tough call."

"…"

This young shikigami, with her robotic thoughts and actions, occasionally, which is to say frequently, got her priorities backward. Not that I always made the right call when it came to my priorities, given that I was out here accompanying her on her treasure hunt when I absolutely needed to be studying, but one thing I could say for sure was that what this flag might or might not be signaling was pretty damn low on the list of priorities.

That's about as easy a call as they come.

"So yeah, basically, it's not about more eyes, instead I want to change my point of view. Since, as you can see, I started out as someone's cherished doll. I'm an ankle-biter."

"An ankle-biter."

"In other words, I don't have the requisite altitude to carry out a search like this. I mean, when you're looking for something in your room and you're stumped, you get up on a chair or a desk and scan the room, right? Tall people are at an advantage in searching for things."

"Hmm…from a perspective perspective, sure. If the thing you're looking for is hidden by something, it'll probably be easier to find with a bird's-eye view…"

Not always, though, of course.

There are places that are easier to burrow into if you're an ankle-biter–if you're small, and sometimes a low perspective is actually more advantageous.

Her owner must have tasked her with this search precisely because it required a low perspective–but having hit a dead end, I guess Ononoki decided she needed my help.

“Listen, though, Ononoki. It’s true that I’m taller than you…but that’s only relatively speaking. Objectively I’m not all that tall, you know?”

“Anyone can see that. Even someone as short as me. You’re objectionably not very tall.”

“Objectively, not objectionably.”

“Objectively speaking, you’re objectionable.”

“Nope. That’s just your point of view.”

“My perspective is the whole problem. Sure, your height isn’t going to make that much of a difference, Monstieur…but here’s the thing. You’re studying for your college entrance exams, so you must be familiar with the branch of mathematics known as addition?”

“You don’t have to be studying for exams to be familiar with that branch of mathematics.”

“Naturally, a mathematical girl like me knows about it too.”

“Mathematical girl…”

Wasn’t that the title of some ancient book on Japanese arithmetic?

Man, Japan is really something. Before we had magical girls we had mathematical girls–maybe the popular culture of this country really hasn’t changed all that much since ancient times.

“I find that hard to believe about you, Ononoki…”

“Rude. Shall I prove it to you? I’ll tell you what the largest prime number is.”

“The second you said ‘largest prime number,’ what you proved is that you know zero about math.”

“I’m the one who discovered the concept of zero.”

“Shut up!”

“Right now we’re talking about addition. We take my really short height, add your pretty short height to it, and abracadabra, aberrationcadabra, it becomes a really pretty tall height. About nine feet, specifically.”

“…”

Thanks for rubbing it in about my height, but that aside–to put Ononoki’s mechanical statement in terms that even someone of my limited linguistic skill could understand, she was in effect saying, “Let me ride on your shoulders.”

The cherished dream of a cherished doll.

Well, even if nine feet was a bit of an overstatement, we’d definitely clear six, giving Ononoki a bird’s-eye view that afforded a completely different perspective on her search–hmm, a tween girl shoulder ride event, huh?

That was not what I’d been after, and I had no illusions that an event could make up for my depressing exam results, but if it would get me home even one minute sooner, then I had no choice.

A flag had apparently been set whether I liked it or not, so to get out of that as well, I had no choice but to give this tween girl a ride on my shoulders.

Wait, hang on.

This wasn’t a first, was it?

A shoulder ride event reminded me of this crazy occasion when I was the one getting the shoulder ride, if you can believe it–I ended up being the talk of the town for a while thanks to that.

What a sorry urban legend.

For someone who’d even been a vampire.

As a shikigami, Ononoki certainly had the strength to carry me on her shoulders, but in this case it was clearly better the other way around–there's a balance to everything. And it's only by preserving that balance that we can maintain the proper order of things.

But I was dealing with someone who lacked common sense.

In addition to common sense, Ononoki also lacked things like consideration, and humanity–probably best to make sure we were on the same page. In fact, I preferred to have it in writing, but…since there wasn't time for that, I'd have to make do with an oral response.

Either way, I was probably overthinking it.

Maybe thinking it over at all was a waste of effort–regrettably, however, Ononoki's reply was totally divorced from any human response I might've expected.

"Ononoki. There's something I need to know."

"Something you need to know? Uh-uh, if you want to know what it feels like to embrace me, you'll have to wait till after the mission's over."

"Enough with the jokes… For this addition you're talking about, it's cool if you ride on my shoulders, right? I know you've got superhuman strength, but I still think it would look better than doing it the other way around, yeah? Don't want to be too conspicuous, you know?"

"Somehow I get the sense that's not the only reason," Ononoki prefaced, making her seem suspiciously well-versed in human emotion despite being a shikigami, after which she continued, "but no, Monstieur."

"Huh? What'd you say?"

"No, Monster."

“Hey, what happened to the *u* and the *i*?”

“You and I are right here, so stop quibbling. Listen, Monstieur. I won’t ride on your shoulders.”

“Huh?”

“I won’t squeeze your cranium with my thunder thighs.”

“You can just leave it at ‘I won’t ride on your shoulders.’ And when I ask you to repeat yourself, say the same thing again the second time.”

“I won’t ride on your shoulders, and you can’t ride on mine. Think about it, the loss would be too great if we did it that way.”

“Loss?”

“Whoever ended up on whoever’s shoulders, it would involve sitting, right? We’d only be adding on that person’s seated height. You may have a lot of confidence in your seated height, Monstieur, but your seated height plus inseam wouldn’t be shorter than your seated height, would it?”

“How could that be true for anyone? My leg length isn’t a negative number.”

“I also discovered negative numbers.”

“You’ll get the Fields Medal for sure. Hell, they’ll establish the Ononoki Medal.”

“The Ononoki Medal. That’s got a captivating ring to it.”

“So by ‘loss,’ you meant that if one of us rode on the other’s shoulders, we wouldn’t be as tall as you hoped–but, still and all, Ononoki. That’s an unavoidable loss. I don’t see any way to get a higher perspective outside of, or above and beyond, a shoulder ride. Even if I held you up, at best you’d be at the same height as me.”

“That’s not holding me up, that’s just holding me tight.”

“Okay then, even if I tossed you upsy-daisy.”

“I know I look like a little girl, Monstieur, but that doesn’t mean I want to be treated like one… Seriously, it’s simple. I just have to do the same thing I always do.”

“Always do?”

“If I call it ‘the thing she always makes me do,’ does that help?”

“…?”

It didn’t.

That is, I didn’t want it to.

A few minutes later.

I stood looking out from a lofty vantage point.

That is, I was standing atop Ononoki–atop one of her fingers, which was thrust upward as if she was pointing at the heavens.

“…”

It’s not totally clear to me what her primary role as the familiar of an expert really is–but the role she actually carries out in the course of her day-to-day duties seems largely to approximate that of a chauffeur.

Though obviously I don’t mean that this tween girl actually drives a car–the expert who employs her “can’t set foot on the ground,” so instead, Ononoki ferries her employer around on her finger or her shoulders or her head.

Transporting someone around like a piece of luggage is impressive, and I’ve always been impressed by Ms. Expert’s ability to be transported like that as well–but never in a million years did I think that I’d have the pleasure.

Okay, true…

This way there was no loss…

In fact, not an inch of my legs was wasted (whether or not I have confidence in their length is another story); moreover, the length of Ononoki's arm and finger were added in as well, so I was in fact looking down from a height of "about nine feet," as she had initially, and confoundingly, predicted.

That other time I'd "gotten" a shoulder ride, my perspective had been pretty damn high as well, but this was definitely higher–I mean, I could never be on the bottom of this particular arrangement…nor, ordinarily, on top either.

Balancing atop a single finger?

What was I, a basketball?

Not that I was being spun around, but as someone with a not particularly good sense of equilibrium, standing on her finger at all, however unsteadily, seemed entirely down to how good she was at adjusting the balance for me.

It was a bit like a ride, and while this wasn't the time or the place, I was enjoying this bit just a bit.

"When you carry her around, do you maintain the balance for her like this?"

"Nope, with her there's no need. She's got her own special riding style–though I do have to be extra careful not to make a mistake and dump her on the ground."

If I did, she'd be pissed off for real, said Ononoki.

"Pissed off for real, huh…"

For reals.

Shinobu slept through all of this, incidentally. Given how badly she and Ononoki get along, she may've been awake and just playing possum.

What sort of demon acts like a possum, though? Seems like an unbelievable step down for an aberration.

"I'd get the blame even if it was her own fault. There isn't much technique involved, but I do have to be really careful, it's pretty rough. It's so much more relaxing to carry you, Monstieur, since I know you won't complain at all."

"I hate to say it, Ononoki, since it makes me happy that you think so, but I'm not that easygoing."

In that sense, this was the perfect height.

It's not like I'd get off without a scratch if she dropped me, but as long as I didn't land on anything really terrible, it wouldn't be life-threatening, nor would I lose consciousness, so I'd be able to complain to Ononoki to my heart's content.

"…"

Speaking of dropping things.

"Listen, Ononoki. For now we'll continue the search in this configuration, but–"

"Man, you give up quick, Monstieur."

"I prefer to think that I'm just quick to move on."

"'If you can't figure out the solution, just leave the problem unsolved,' isn't that your catchphrase?"

"How is a guy like that going to pass any exams…"

Well.

Senjogahara did tell me that skipping problems you couldn't solve is an unavoidable technique for entrance exams–but Hanekawa advocates the prodigious technique of "solve the hard questions first, and the rest will be easy." A little too prodigious.

"This goes well beyond being conspicuous, so I'd like to find it as soon as possible…but since we're talking about finding something, does that mean that someone lost it somewhere?"

"Hm?"

"Come on, don't 'hm?' me, Ononoki. Are we looking for something that you…or that somebody, lost?"

"Good question. I'm a just-does-what-she's-told-to-do girl, so I just do what I'm told to do."

"If you're going to append a descriptor like that, at least make it easier to say. But when you're searching for something, it's usually something somebody lost, isn't it?"

"Not necessarily. You'll lose your balance for sure, almost necessarily, but maybe it isn't something that somebody lost."

"Don't even hint at such an inauspicious future."

"We could be looking for something that someone hid somewhere, or something that disappeared in some kind of accident. If you want to go around making assumptions about it, suit yourself, but can you not cause any confusion for the people on the ground with your hasty conclusions?"

"…"

Stern…

Like she even knew what we were looking for.

"You said that it'll be instantly recognizable, but does that go for me too? It must, since you've got me up on the watchtower here… If

there's been some kind of misunderstanding, I'm sorry, but the drain on my vampiric skills has been pretty intense lately, so if you're counting on my aberrational vision, you're out of luck."

"It's fine. I'm not counting on anything from you."

"Then why the hell am I up here? Why are you carting me around like a portable shrine?"

"Right. The reason I'm kakakarting you around–"

"Ditch the pointless Shinobu imitation."

"…is that you can find it even without aberrational powers of vision. So make like a weather vane and look every which way, please."

"Can I assume it's on the ground?"

"Don't assume anything. Don't even think about anything. You just concentrate on keeping your eyes peeled."

"…"

How did I end up getting ordered around by a tween girl? When people are feeling emotionally vulnerable, I suppose they just opt for the path of least resistance.

Though it remained to be seen if getting ordered around by her actually fit that bill…

"Anyway, if you just inform me anytime anything catches your eye or seems weird, even if it isn't suspicious, that'll be sufficient."

"Sufficient, she says…"

Her character was all over the place, as usual.

How the hell can that violent onmyoji employ such an inconsistent shikigami–how does she control her?

By force, I guess?

That might shade into domestic violence territory, depending.

“Anything that catches my eye or seems weird…apart from our reflection in the traffic mirror at an intersection, I assume.”

“If you want to be sarcastic, save it for later. Right now I’m busy.”

“…”

Won’t even make conversation with me, huh?

I wondered how she could qualify as busy when her only job was to hold me up, but apparently Ononoki was also scanning our surroundings while she supported me on one finger. She’d already searched this area once, but they say “search seven times before you blame someone else”–though that’s a different type of admonition.

“It’s not like I’ve got a ton of time myself,” I griped.

“You talking about that ‘six months left to live’ thing?” asked Ononoki, still holding me up and not even pausing in her search–an intrusive remark, totally out of context. “Out of all the stuff you mentioned from this past year, that’s the only one that’s still unresolved, isn’t it–your remaining days are marching right down the drain, aren’t they. Is that why your exam results were so disgraceful?”

“…”

“Though I bet it’s not your own life you’re worried about, Monstieur–it’s your wife, not your life.”

“Don’t try to squeeze in a pun while we’re having a serious conversation.”

“I’d rather you thought of it as a light jest.”

“Don’t try to squeeze in a light jest either.”

“What? So you’d rather I squeezed you with my thunder thighs? I’m sorry, but my thighs aren’t all that thunderous. I know you like ’em plump, I’m terribly sorry.”

“I’ll murder you,” I threatened this tween girl. “And anyway, that’s not what you should be apologizing about.”

“Oh? You don’t like ’em plump?”

“That’s a whole other conversation. And while we’re at it, Senjogahara’s not my wife.”

“Funny. I wasn’t talking about Senjogahara.”

“Huh? You weren’t? Then did you mean Shinobu?”

“Nah, I was talking about Senjogahara.”

“If you want to make light jests, be a little less heavy-handed as a conversationalist–and while we’re at it, don’t just call her ‘Senjogahara.’ You’ve never even met her, have you?”

“I never have, no,” answered Ononoki, turning the corner.

Where the hell were we going? The exact opposite direction from my house… Was I even getting home before the day was out? Humans and aberrations have completely different senses of time and distance, after all…

Couldn’t she at least tell me how large of an area we were searching? From her movements thus far, even that wasn’t certain.

Not limited to this or any area.

Not that I was surprised, but the instructions the violent onmyoji gave Ononoki seemed pretty damn vague–though in light of an earlier case, maybe it wasn’t the onmyoji that the shikigami was serving.

Particularly if it was the ringleader of those experts–

“How long was it again, Monstieur? The amount of time you’ve got left? Which ends first, your exam prep or your life?”

“That’s a wonderfully indelicate question, thanks for that. Way to rub it in.” Or maybe, to come right out with it. Because I have to say, that kind of candor felt better than weirdly dancing around the issue. “That’s a tough one. The exams themselves end first. But the graduation ceremony comes before the exam results are announced.”

“We could say you’re lucky.”

“Could we not?”

“Same goes for the intensity of the drain on your vampiric powers. You’re repeating the same futile effort, or even more, the same futile defeat, over and over again.”

“It’s not futile…”

But true, it hadn’t been productive.

It’d even been counter-productive–maybe it was about time I rethought my strategy of charging in blindly as soon as I recovered.

“I’m not sure charging in blindly counts as a strategy,” Ononoki shrugged.

Which very nearly made me topple off her finger.

“Nothing I can say to that…”

“I figured Big Sis was the only person who adopted that strategy.”

“So does it count as a strategy or not?”

In her case, maybe it did…

Then again, the serpent deity isn't immortal, and she specializes in immortal aberrations, so it doesn't seem like her turn to take the stage–though the same's true for Ononoki.

Hm.

That reminds me, at some point someone told me that one of the reasons snakes became sacred was that the physiological phenomenon of ecdysis made them symbols of immortality–let me see, who did I hear that from again?

My memory's fuzzy, and I can't seem to connect the dots.

Been happening a lot lately.

Been pushing the exam prep a little too hard, I guess.

"Hanekawa's out trotting the globe looking for Oshino on my behalf–but unfortunately, she hasn't had any luck."

"Yeah. Big Brother Oshino–I haven't seen him in a while either."

"Hmmm…"

Seriously, where the hell could that dissolute bastard have gone?

Hanekawa went overseas, but I can't picture Oshino even having a passport…

"Hey, Monstieur. So what do you plan to do? If you want, I could always get in touch with Ms. Gaen for you like I did before, you know?"

"That's okay…"

Leaving aside why she was being so condescending, letting Ononoki rope that woman into this was right out. The whole situation came about in the first place because I'd done her a favor "as a friend"–no, scratch that, I really shouldn't be laying the blame for this at anyone else's feet.

But if you'll permit me to lay the blame at some*thing* else's feet–you could say the culprit was that talisman she entrusted me with.

The root of all evil.

"…Plus, I flouted her will by not using that talisman. I'm afraid I can't be looking to her for help."

"Well. As a friend, she might be surprisingly willing to listen to what you have to say?"

"I know she's not a bad person… She just expects a little too much from her friends in the way of payback."

Then again, with me and Senjogahara's lives on the line, maybe I should be willing to make any sacrifice–in this case, though, the price I have to pay might very well be Shinobu Oshino, at a minimum, and Nadeko Sengoku in the worst-case scenario.

I can't do that.

If I could make such a decision, I would never have ended up in this situation–I know full well that this is no time for rhetorical flourishes, but since cool-headed judgment was impossible at this point, the only strategy left to me was the heat of battle.

"Yeah, fair enough. That's Ms. Gaen for you, ask for a casual favor and later you'll pay for it in spades. If there's something you want to protect, maybe safest to leave her out of it."

"You said it…though I don't know about safest. My current sitch is about as unsafe as it gets."

"Though probably…the fact that there's been no contact from her end means that she has no desire to help you."

"Sounds like it's too much to ask, then."

“Maneuvering so that things seem like too much to ask is her strong suit.”

“A little too shrewd for my taste.”

“But isn’t Big Brother Oshino the same way? Even if Miss Tsubasa of the Hanekawas found him, there’s no guarantee he would help, is there? He’d say, ‘Can’t save, Missy, it takes a person on their own for saved’ or something.”

“Since when does Oshino speak such broken Japanese? What the hell kind of country has he been living in?”

“Listening to a conversation between me with my monotone and Big Brother Oshino with his broken Japanese would probably be intolerable.”

“If you really think so, how ’bout you fix your monotone.”

“It’s unfixable,” declared Ononoki.

It was a strangely firm declaration for the shikigami–her monotone was still monotone, but something felt kind of off about it.

I had to wonder.

Was her character shifting again?

“Anyway, you’re not wrong, Oshino might say that–which is why Hanekawa’s search is more for temporary peace of mind than anything. She’s just doing it for me on the side while she does some location scouting.”

Well, maybe not just on the side, but that was really all I could expect from her.

“Ultimately, it’s up to me to take care of it somehow or other. I sowed the seed, I’ll do something about it.”

“If that’s true, if you did sow the seed, then yeah, I guess it’d be up to you to do something about it.”

“Hm? Are you saying someone else sowed it? No, I don’t believe that for a second.”

“Nor should you–since seeds are buried in the earth. Until they sprout, you don’t even know they’re there… But don’t you think it’s strange? How all this chaos has been centering around you, Monstieur, almost like it’s maintaining the balance, almost like someone’s got the answer sheet–”

“…”

“Even if it’s true what they say, that once you encounter an aberration, you get drawn to them–it still seems like things are somehow balancing themselves out. I don’t think you’re so slow on the uptake that you wouldn’t think it was unnatural.”

“Oh, but I am. I’m constantly in over my head just trying to jerry-rig things–and I’m finally hitting my limit with that,” I said.

Well, moping to a tween girl wasn’t exactly a cool look, even if she was an aberration, and anyway, I shouldn’t put Ononoki, who was ultimately on Ms. Gaen’s side, in a difficult position, so maybe it was best to leave it at that.

With that in mind, I returned the conversation to our search.

“I don’t see anything likely… Are you sure it’s around here, Ononoki?”

“I don’t need you to report that you don’t see anything. Report back when you’ve found something.”

“Geez…”

What an attitude to take with someone who’s helping you search for something free of charge, spending his precious time in the bargain…

“Something instantly recognizable–I wonder what it is.”

“Who knows, I can’t even begin to guess… But Monstieur, I’ve got something of a *could be.*”

“Oh yeah? What is it?”

“Something instantly recognizable to anyone–but which you lose sight of the moment you start searching. In other words,” said Ononoki–looking up at me atop her finger. “A smile!”

She said it in a monotone.

With no expression whatsoever.

“…”

Okay, that definitely was something I wanted to find for her, and soon.

Though forget about a punch line, on this particular occasion nothing happened at all, I just went on a wild goose chase, standing on the finger of a tween girl. That’s the whole story. Not even a run-of-the-mill mystery, let alone any tale of an aberration.

And though we wandered around town until night fell, we never found anything, our labors were fruitless, so there wasn’t even a smile to be had–you could say that all that happened was that I went for a stroll with Ononoki.

“No luck, huh? Oh well. Bye-bye. Bye-byaaay.”

And with that sideways peace sign, Ononoki headed off. She didn’t seem particularly broken up about not finding what she was looking for–in fact, though she remained expressionless, she even had a vague air of satisfaction at having done a good day’s work.

I wonder if she gets paid by the hour.

Gets paid the same whether she gets results or not… As far as I could tell, if nothing else, she didn't seem inclined in the slightest to put in any unpaid overtime.

Well, I guess a fee-for-service shikigami wouldn't really cut it.

Which is why, after being suddenly left in the lurch like that, I just headed home and went back to my exam prep as if nothing had happened–though having been mentally exhausted by the exam that afternoon and physically exhausted by helping Ononoki with her search, I got sleepy pretty early.

Headed home, messed around with a tween girl, got back to my house, went to bed?

Hey, wait a sec.

Don't you need an episode before you get to an epilogue? Isn't that kind of like playing Name That Tune, where you never get past the intro to the song? No surprise that I felt that way, but the person who gave me the answer to this answerless quiz was, if you can believe it, or you guessed it, or yet again, Tsubasa Hanekawa.

Really, I feel like Hanekawa's sleuthing percentage is a little too high, but I'd prefer if you chalked that up purely to her outstanding scholarly ability and intelligence. It's not just because I constantly rely on her to help me out or anything.

Though she didn't actually explain anything to me directly after my story was done–"Hmmm. You don't say. Is this really the time?" was all she said.

I didn't think that response was particularly unnatural–I just thought, *This isn't the time for that kind of thing, yeah,* since it wasn't the time for that kind of thing, and it wasn't unnatural.

In other words, I didn't notice.

Ononoki's thoughtfulness, and Hanekawa's thoughtfulness, and how they created a situation where it wasn't unnatural.

"What do you think is the hardest thing to find?"

It was some time later–

All the stuff with the snake god was over, but the next stuff had started, somewhere around then–Hanekawa asked me that question.

I mean, since she asked me out of the blue like that, at first I had no idea what she was trying to say.

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Ononoki, dummy–you've ended up cohabitating, right? So I thought maybe I should ask you. What do you think is the hardest thing to find?"

"The hardest thing to find…"

Rings a bell.

Reminds me of when Shinobu and I were playing hide the donut in my room–umm, should I answer based on that?

"Let's see, seems to me the hardest thing to find would be…"

"No, that question is just the warm up, how it seems to you and how you answer are irrelevant, Araragi."

"Irrelevant? Huh? Then what's the real question?"

"It's 'What do you think is the easiest thing to find?'"

"Now, that would have to be something 'instantly recognizable'…"

But what does that actually mean? When you think about it, pretty much anything becomes "instantly recognizable" as soon as you find it.

As long as the answer isn't "a smile," of course…

"No, no, Araragi, you can't let yourself get hung up on the 'instantly recognizable' part. I mean, it was a lie, after all."

"A lie?"

"Well, lie might be going too far. But Ononoki wasn't actually looking for anything. The hardest thing to find is, well, just that–*you can't find something that doesn't exist.*"

"…"

What?

Hang on a sec, I don't disagree…but why did she lie to me like that?

"Did she tell me a little white lie just so she could hang out with me?"

"Nope," Hanekawa flatly contradicted me.

A little too flatly.

"The answer to why she did it is 'the easiest thing to find'–of course, things that stand out are easy to find, but what stands out? Nothing does more than *someone who's looking for something,*" she said. "Constantly stopping to peer at things, squatting down, standing on tiptoe–it all adds up to some pretty suspicious behavior. Getting out of control and yelling weird things or whatever is another story, sure–but standing on the finger of a girl who looks like a doll as you search for something is pretty much just as conspicuous."

"…"

Conspicuous–or even.

Ostentatious?

“In other words, Araragi, I imagine her intention was to make you conspicuous. So she ran you up the flagpole.”

“Like a flag…”

I–set an event flag, or rather, I *was* an event flag?

What kind of a guy am I?

“B-But why would Ononoki want to make me conspicuous? Did she want to parade a moron who flubbed the national exam?”

“It’s possible.”

It’s possible?

Come on, flatly contradict me already.

Now of all times.

“But not only that–you already know, don’t you, Araragi? That there was someone in town back in January that you absolutely had to avoid running into?”

“…”

“*That you absolutely couldn’t run into–and who definitely didn’t want to run into you.*”

Though ultimately you did run into each other, continued Hanekawa.

“He was coming to town on a daily basis, so it wouldn’t have been too surprising if you did cross paths–probably, Ononoki kept that from happening for you. By making you conspicuous, she made it easier for him to avoid you.”

“Made me easy to find–*by making me hunt for something un-findable*…”

So that I wouldn’t have a chance encounter–with him.

With that swindler.

"…"

"Of course, there's no guarantee that he spotted you just because you were so conspicuous–so towering, but if he did, then he certainly would've avoided encountering you. Yotsugi probably just didn't want you to have to deal with any more anxiety than you already had on your plate. A situation where nothing happens, where there's no incident, nothing tale-worthy, is probably only going to happen thanks to someone's consideration for you."

Yotsugi Ononoki's consideration.

A consideration I hadn't even considered.

"Going on about how I'll take care of things and not even noticing that my peaceful life is being propped up by something–what a clown. No wonder that bastard always makes fun of me."

"Maybe so. It's true that people have to go and get saved on their own–but in reality, it's impossible to live life all on your own," Hanekawa riffed on Oshino's catchphrase. Perhaps it was an observation based on her experiences living overseas, even if she was still just location scouting. "You can't live all on your own, and even if you wanted to–everyone ends up benefitting from someone's good graces somehow. Eating, traveling, a change of clothes–even sleeping, probably. All of it's possible thanks to someone else."

"Well…yeah, totally. Though we go through our daily lives without ever being aware of it."

"We sure do. That inconspicuous consideration is probably the hardest thing to find," summed up Hanekawa.

Who knows how unpleasant that summary would've sounded in Ononoki's monotone, but coming from Hanekawa, it somehow wasn't grating–no.

Maybe it wouldn’t have sounded unpleasant even coming from Ononoki.

It was that kind of feeling.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
KOYOMI NOTHING

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28			

2
February

When I say that Yozuru Kagenui doesn't walk down any road, it's neither a metaphor nor some impressionistic, high-concept declaration–she literally never sets foot on the ground, every day of her life governed by that constraint.

Which, on its own, makes it sound like a children's game.

Living, proceeding, almost as if she were playing a one-woman game of king of the hill–where the ground is an ocean or the abyss, and you can only walk on raised things like stone steps or concrete walls. The first time I encountered her, she was standing on top of a mailbox.

Well, it might be a game if an elementary school student were the one doing it, but she's a grown woman, so it comes off as pretty damn eccentric–not to mention the fact that elementary school students can play that kind of game because they weigh so little, whereas it's actually pretty difficult for a grown-up. By now I'm sure I don't need to tell how impressive her physical prowess is, but I find myself wondering if that prowess might actually be the result of the daily conditioning this eccentricity affords her.

However you dress it up, though, eccentric is eccentric–a little too eccentric to touch upon, so I've never asked her about it directly.

But as far as I can tell from what I've picked up here and there in our conversations, and from a certain origami enthusiast, there does seem to be a real reason–or at least, it's clear she's not just doing it for the physical conditioning, nor as a game.

Of course, even if there is a reason, I doubt anyone could uphold such a norm without some real drive.

As her enemy.

Or as someone who's battled her head-on, battled and been driven through like that norm–well, well well well, I can safely say no one else is as scary as she is.

I've met quite a few experts in her field, Oshino included, but I have to say Yozuru Kagenui is the scariest of them all.

I'm terrified of her.

So much scarier than an aberration.

So much stronger than a demon.

An onmyoji who drives out aberrations by beating them up has to be rarer than an aberration–then again, it's precisely because she's that kind of person that her behavioral principle is so straightforward and easy to understand, while at the same time being irregular.

The randomness of never walking on the road is perhaps symbolic of her irregularity.

That reminds me, she told me once that she specializes in immortal aberrations because "with them, there's no such thing as going too far," but I wonder. Can I take those words at face value?

While her methodology may be easier to understand than Oshino's or Kaiki's, she's the most antisocial of the whole bunch, the biggest misfit–there's something I'd be curious to ask her, a human being who nonetheless dwells in a darkness darker than an aberration's.

And who doesn't walk on roads.

I want to ask her, *What is a road?*

I'm pretty sure she'd answer:

"Roads aren't the only places what are good for walking."

"Take that!"

"Gff!"

"And that! And that!"

"Gff! Gff!"

You might get the impression from these cute battle cries and grunts that the spectacle depicted here is nothing more than some friendly horseplay, but in fact they express an extraordinarily mild version of Ms. Kagenui beating the shit out of me. With a final “And that!” she released a back kick fit to tear off my entire flank–it felt as if a section of my torso popped out, like I was a Jenga tower or something, and I finally collapsed to the ground, ending our little back-and-forth.

“Well now, aren’t you out of shape–when we had that little dust-up over the summer, I reckon you had a mite more backbone.”

Not that I didn’t smash that backbone to splinters–noted Ms. Kagenui, leaping through the air and landing on a brand-new stone lantern.

Landing atop a lantern at a sacred shrine seemed like blasphemy, but she’d probably be forgiven at a shrine like this, where no god was currently present–though given that she couldn’t set foot on the ground, she might’ve done the same thing even at a shrine where a god was in residence.

For my part, I was lying flat on my back in the center of the ceremonial path, so I was obstructing any right I might have had to criticize her.

“Gk…” I moaned. Every inch of my body felt bruised. “This is ridiculous… I thought we agreed that fighting was out of bounds this time…”

“’Fraid not. The only restriction was on meta jokes.”

“Was that it? I really had the wrong impression…”

“That is, you were the one what invited a body here to fight, no?”

“Was I?”

I was.

I really had the wrong idea.

If you just heard that snippet, you might get the mistaken impression that I'm suicidal, but yes, on this particular occasion, I myself, of my own volition, asked Ms. Kagenui to spar with me–spar?

What, am I trying to become an MMA fighter or something?

And this wretched outcome–

"You know a body was going easy on you, right? Niiice and easy."

"Yeah, I'm aware of that…"

Couldn't she have gone a little easier on me, though? Niiicer and easier. Like a sponge filled with holes.

"I'm painfully aware of that…"

"By the by, what were you after? Challenging a body to a fight out of the blue like that."

"…"

I had assumed that since she knew the circumstances, she'd be able to guess without a full explanation and accept my reckless challenge on those grounds…but apparently, Ms. Kagenui had beaten the shit out of me for no particular reason, without knowing the reason.

She's really something.

That's not the kind of thing just anyone is capable of.

Since she was Oshino's classmate, I ended up unconsciously expecting her to be the "perceptive" type like him–but turns out she's nothing like Oshino, or Kaiki.

Easy to understand in a good sense.

And easy to understand in a bad sense.

Though I guess they do have something in common, insofar as there's nothing straightforward about dealing with any of them…

"Good question…"

February.

One day towards the end of February, I visited Kita-Shirahebi Shrine–that once-again-godless shrine where I'd almost died countless times, where there had recently been another casualty, was definitely not a place I went lightly, but this expert with whom I had business.

Ms. Kagenui, Ms. Yozuru Kagenui the violent onmyoji, had taken up residence there, so that day I had no choice.

Yes, just as Mèmè Oshino had lodged in the ruins of that erstwhile abandoned cram school while he was staying in town, Yozuru Kagenui was at present lodging at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine–which took a *you can't be serious* level of inner strength.

As an expert, she ought to know better than anyone what kind of a place that shrine is–I thought maybe she was there under orders from the ringleader of their little group of experts, but from what she said, it didn't sound like it.

Apparently, and this makes perfect sense to me, or seems natural, but those two don't exactly see eye to eye–even if she wasn't raising a flag of rebellion, the fact that she was living at the shrine was at least done somewhat out of spite.

Though–there was the thing with Tadatsuru.

So calling it spite might be going too far–but Ms. Kagenui herself must've had some level of self-awareness about it, because rather than making her shikigami Yotsugi Ononoki stay there with her, she put her in my home as a kind of precaution.

Putting a tween girl in my home…

As a precaution?!

“…”

Well, anyway.

To give an update, or, a simple summary of my present circumstances: Last summer a legendary vampire drank my blood, and if you can believe it, I turned into a vampire myself, after which I somehow managed to return to being human, though with some lingering vampirism in my body–if that was all, it wouldn’t have been an impediment to me living life as a human being, but stupid me, I relied on that lingering vampirism to deal with the various difficulties that I encountered thereafter.

I don’t think I was wrong to do so.

If I hadn’t, I never would’ve been able to overcome those difficulties–and even my vampirism hadn’t been enough to overcome that incident involving the serpent deity.

So I’d had no choice.

Even if I had known how it would turn out.

But I do have to pay the price.

The price for relying on the power of an aberration–on the power of darkness.

As I continued to flirt with the darkness of my own accord, as I continued to stray into the darkness, I was once again suffusing my body with darkness–of my own accord.

Concisely put, the fact that I was turning into a vampire became plainly apparent–it was a transformation I hadn’t intended, and what’s more, it’s irreversible.

For now, I just don’t appear in mirrors or photographs–right, just a small bug, but if I keep relying on my vampiric power, I’ll start

turning to ash under the sun's rays, I'll become unable to eat garlic, I'll melt at the touch of holy water.

In return I get absolute, awesome power–but I have no hope of continuing to be part of human society.

In other words, from here on out I can't rely any more on my vampiric nature, regardless of what I have to cope with–that's the long and the short of it.

"Which is why, now that things have kind of settled down for the moment, I was thinking maybe you could help me with some practice, Ms. Kagenui. I was thinking how great it would be if from now on, when I run into difficulties, I could deal with them as adroitly as you do, without resorting to my vampiric power–"

"A-ha," she clapped her hands.

Squatting there atop the stone lantern.

"So that's what you've got in mind. But I reckon you'd best forget it."

"Really?"

Had I best forget it?

I appreciated her candor, but then why the hell did she just…

"Firstly, my way o' doing things can't be learnt overnight, and secondly, it's not exactly the orthodox method among us experts. Not something I'm fixing to teach to a youngster."

"…"

Ms. Kagenui may not be in her teens, but I'm pretty sure she's still on the young side of things for her business.

And, just between you and me, part of the reason I wanted to learn her methodology was that she seems to employ the terribly simple and easy-to-understand negotiation tactic of "suppressing

aberrations through violence"–though maybe it can't be learned overnight for that very reason.

The simplest things are always the most difficult.

It's the same with studying.

"And finally, if you're keen to learn my methods through actual combat like this," continued Ms. Kagenui, "you'll be dead before you learn them."

"…"

Yup.

That's a plenty good enough reason for me not to take her as my sensei.

The course fees are a little too steep.

I was completely helpless against her even in vampire mode, so I had no hope of matching her when I was mere flesh and blood–as I considered this, I finally got my breathing under control and stood up from where I lay sprawled out on my back.

Godless as the shrine might be, I still felt antsy lying around inside its precincts.

"Not exactly the time for this kind of thing, is it?" chided Ms. Kagenui. "The big exam must be coming up, everything you've been studying for–this ought to be the time for your, whatchamacallit, back-up-private-school exams."

"Unfortunately, my parents don't have such high hopes for me. The only exam I'm taking is for my first-choice school."

"Hmmm…takes a certain kind of grit, I'll give you that. Now, what'd I do when it came time for exams–can't recall anymore. Feels as though I just woke up one day and I was in college."

"I somehow doubt that…"

“Then I woke up one day, and I had graduated, then I woke up one day, and I was in this line of work–beating the daylights of anyone who rubbed me the wrong way.”

“…”

If that’s true, then she’s a fucking prodigy.

When she says anyone who rubbed her the wrong way, I assume she’s talking about aberrations…or is she including humans in that as well?

Hmmm.

I’d come to beg for instruction, but turns out she’s really not the type of person I want to get too close to after all.

“It’s no good to push myself too hard either, though, is it. At this point, things’ll just turn out how they’re going to turn out.”

“Almost sounds like you’re throwing in the towel. Eh, now that you’ve gotten a bit of an extension on your remaining days, s’pose a gap year might be looking A-OK to you.”

“No, I’d really prefer to avoid that. For various reasons.”

“All the more reason you shouldn’t be up here at this godforsaken shrine trading punches with the likes of me,” said Ms. Kagenui–what we were doing wasn’t exactly trading punches, since I was the only one getting punched, but anyway, for once she sounded like a proper adult.

“Why do you reckon I had Yotsugi infiltrate your home? I was fixing to make things so you wouldn’t be bothered by any aberrations, at least for a while.”

“No, I understand that… It’s just, being protected by little girls and tweens is a pretty sorry lifestyle.”

“By little girl, you mean the former Kissshot, I take it? That’s a six-hundred-year-old aberration you’re talking about–and that tween, well, Yotsugi’s a corpse doll tsukumogami.”

“When you put it like that, I guess I’ve got some pretty amazing guardians…”

A life where nothing happens means someone’s watching out for you. Was it Hanekawa who said that?

“Which is exactly why–*that one* can’t act rashly.”

“That one?”

“That one, or anyone–but enough about that. If you want to learn something from me, how’s this: it’s best not to overreach yourself. Not that there aren’t some folk who’ve tried to do more or less the same, and not that I haven’t acted the teacher on a whim now and again, but it’s never once gone well.” Ms. Kagenui cackled as she spoke–and trying to picture just exactly what she meant when she said, “it’s never once gone well,” it didn’t seem like these disciples she’d taken on a whim had gotten off lightly…

Hm.

It seemed like a good idea, but maybe I’d jumped the gun–that is, maybe this was a lesson that I shouldn’t act on impulse all the time. Though calling it a lesson puts me in mind of that swindler…

“Ms. Kagenui.” Abandoning my vain notion of getting Ms. Kagenui to teach me, I asked her a question out of simple curiosity: “How did you get involved in this world?”

“Hmm? This world?”

“Well, I mean, aberrations, or tales of aberrations, that world…”

“To be honest, I’m not too keen on such distinctions–I just mess up anyone what sticks in my craw.”

More or less the same thing she was saying before.

This struck me over the summer too, but seems like she operates on an even simpler behavioral principle than I suspected.

The dichotomy between justice and evil.

No, not justice–good?

Then again, if you ask the likes of Oshino, this world is overflowing with unpleasant goodness and insufferable justice–though that means there's an equal amount of eagerly anticipated and compelling evil.

Is Ms. Kagenui actually living on the straight and narrow in a world where nothing is straightforward?

"I reckon it all started back in kindergarten, when I slugged some uppity brat–though looking back on it now, perhaps that brat was possessed by some no-good something. This was in the days before I specialized in immortal aberrations, of course."

"Well, I would be surprised if you've been specializing in immortal aberrations since kindergarten…"

Ms. Kagenui's kindergarten days…

Something I absolutely can't imagine–I wonder if I could've even beaten her in a fight back then.

I wish nothing but happiness for that brat who got slugged by li'l miss Kagenui.

"And, you said the reason you choose to take on immortal aberrations now is that there's no such thing as going too far–right? Conversely, that must mean that you've gone too far on plenty of other occasions. Is that why you chose your particular specialty?"

“Well, I reckon it is–my, but you’re full of questions. I don’t suppose you’re fixing to let me join this Araragi Harem or whatever that I’ve been hearing so much about?”

“…”

Why does she know about that?

About the Araragi Harem–no, I mean, no such tacky-ass organization exists. She must’ve heard about it from Ononoki.

What a blabbermouth.

The information leak’s probably only getting worse since we’ve been living under the same roof–but maybe that’s also a good thing?

Since it’s definitely not a negative for me if Ms. Kagenui is kept abreast of the fact that Tsukihi is living a problem-free life.

“I’d love to be a big enough man someday to be able to make a pass at you–though forget about bigness, the way things are going, I’m gonna end up not being a person at all.”

“And when that happens I’ll kill you dead, don’t you worry. Which is also why I’ve assigned Yotsugi to stick to you–I told her to show you no mercy if it seems you’ve strayed any further from the path of humanity.”

“…”

The path of humanity, huh?

I felt as if I’d walked the path of human decency in my own way, so how the hell did it come to this?

And the idea that Ononoki was an assassin…

The unbelievable truth slid into focus.

No, upon reflection it made perfect sense, I just hadn’t thought about it until she said it. It was easy to forget in the face of that

adorable doll, but yes, Ononoki too was a professional who specialized in taking on “immortal aberrations.”

Ha–Ms. Kagenui laughed.

Still and all.

“I reckon there’s no need to be so negative–on account of if you can keep on with a normal day-to-day like this, you can live as a human being, no muss, no fuss.”

“…Even without a reflection?”

“Not having a reflection isn’t going to kill you. Turning to ash in the sunlight’s a whole other kettle of fish–it’d be scary if you didn’t know what was causing it, I reckon you might be crawling out of your skin, but you know perfectly well why it’s happening. And as long as your vampirification doesn’t cross the line, you’re fine.”

“Sure, I know all that, but–can I really live out the rest of my life like this without anything bad happening? It’s only been a year since I heard of aberrations for the first time, and already so much has happened–”

“It’s been mighty frequent indeed. That you’ve encountered trouble.”

“…”

One of those mighty frequent troubles was with her and Ononoki, but I’m not complaining. Even now we definitely aren’t what you’d call allies, but we’ve gotten to the point where she at least talks to me like this.

Giving me advice–is definitely not what was going on, but still.

“Well, no one lives out their whole life without some kind of trouble, do they? And yet most folk manage somehow, without becoming vampires–and without turning to heretics like me for help. They manage somehow or other, this, that, or the other way. To put

it plainly, this awareness of aberrations and what not that you and I've ended up with makes us weak."

"Makes us–weak."

"We tremble in the face of the unknown, or we know that we can't know what'll happen. Or the unstable elements in our daily lives increase until we can't concentrate on daily life. I reckon Oshino had the same worry."

"Oshino…"

I can't really picture Oshino worrying about anything.

I always think of him as a slaphappy happy-go-lucky chappy, that is, I've never seen him ruminating or anything like that.

Though, hang on.

It's really just that I never imagined him that way–come to think of it, maybe his obsession with balance arose from his fear of the balance crumbling, of losing his neutrality.

Maybe he was afraid.

Pathologically afraid.

"Kaiki seems genuinely happy-go-lucky in that arena," I remarked. "He just does whatever the hell he feels like, without a thought for the balance of the natural world."

"Well, Kaiki doesn't even believe in aberrations–though you might say he's just protecting himself by adopting that stance. Hardly a lick of difference from Oshino's balance-driven stance, really."

Hardly a lick indeed.

Well, they did use to be friends back in the day–and while I'm the one who said it, there aren't many men less suited to the word "happy-go-lucky" than Kaiki.

Happy-go-lucky is more or less the opposite of ominous, after all.

“But it’s impossible for folk like you and I to take such a stance, isn’t it. Be it balance or denial or what have you.”

“Impossible… How do you mean?”

“You yourself are something like an aberration–and me, I’ve got Yotsugi in my service.”

And maybe we’re more alike even than that, on account of you’ve got the former Kissshot in yours, Ms. Kagenui reminded me.

“Try as we might to maintain our balance, we lean toward the aberrations–we lean on aberrations. So any denial would be a denial of the truth of our own existences.”

“…”

What can I say, hearing it like that made my head spin.

Talking about the two of us as if we had anything in common–the brazen and supremely self-confident Ms. Kagenui, who enacts her eccentricity of never setting foot on the ground with neither shyness nor showiness, unwavering and rooted in her convictions; and me, flailing this way and that every time something crops up, going whichever way the wind blows, like a kite will if you cut it free, or a kite not cut out for free will… But maybe it was precisely because I unconsciously sensed that commonality that I came to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine to seek her tutelage, to this place I really didn’t want to come.

…Yeah.

Peppering Ms. Kagenui with so many questions like this, maybe it did seem like I was trying to persuade her to join the Araragi Harem–not that there is such an organization–but in spite of all that, if there was just one thing I wanted to ask Ms. Kagenui, maybe that was it.

Not how to fight aberrations with my mortal body–nor how Ms. Kagenui got involved in their world–nor how often she'd "gone too far" in the past, nor even how she knew about the existence of the Araragi Harem.

What I wanted to ask her.

What I wanted to ask Yozuru Kagenui was–

"Hey, Ms. Kagenui."

"What is it?"

"What's the deal with you and Ononoki?"

The expert Yozuru Kagenui.

The shikigami aberration Yotsugi Ononoki.

At this point there's no need to reconfirm that the relationship between the two of them is that of an onmyoji and her familiar–the relationship between master and servant, between ruler and ruled. To Ms. Kagenui, Ononoki was property, a weapon to be used in the fight against aberrations, as well as a means of transportation.

If there's anything else I can add to that, it's that the corpse doll that provided the prototype for the tsukumogami Ononoki was apparently a sort of work of art, created in tandem by the Occult Research Club represented by Kagenui, Oshino, Kaiki, and Tadatsuru Teori, back in their college days–a work of art which Ms. Kagenui then took charge of, bringing us up to the present.

That much I know.

On the other hand, I only know that much–I have literally no idea why Ms. Kagenui and Ononoki have been acting in concert since then, after that point, up till now.

I mean, doesn't it seem like kind of a contradiction? Ms. Kagenui, who specializes in immortal aberrations and considers them contrary

to the natural order of things, carries on the fight against them night and day, or maybe every night would be a better way of putting it–for her to employ none other than an immortal aberration as her vehicle, as her good right hand, a being with no lifeforce, who wouldn't even die if you smashed her into smithereens?

Isn't that–just as much of a contradiction as me living life alongside the very vampire I sealed away because I couldn't let her exist?

Isn't that exactly the same thing, exactly the same contradiction?

At some point I heard something about how Ms. Kagenui uses Ononoki as her stand-in to avoid getting too involved in the world of darkness–but using darkness as a buffer against darkness, yup, that's a contradiction.

I've tried to wrap my mind around it, but I've never come to any real conclusions–which is why I wanted to ask Ms. Kagenui directly.

Whatever the answer might be.

I had a feeling it might prove instructive down the line for me and Shinobu's relationship–because her host body inching ever closer to vampiredom was, naturally enough, also having an effect on Shinobu herself.

There was honestly no way of knowing for sure at this juncture whether that influence was positive or negative–but I wanted to hear what Ms. Kagenui had to say, to ensure I could make it a positive one.

An expert living alongside an aberration.

Maybe that was just my idealized image of her–though I assure you, it's not that I harbor some dreamy dream of becoming a half-human/half-fey expert, not at all.

"Me and Yotsugi?"

Asking about their relationship may have been kind of intrusive, but Ms. Kagenui didn't seem particularly put out, only surprised–if she was put out, she might put me out of my misery, so upon reflection I had risked my life by asking that question.

And her surprise seemed to be surprise that I was asking her after all this time–like, *We haven't already talked about that?* or *You haven't heard about it from someone else?*

"As you well know, we're master and s–onmyoji and shikigami."

"Were you about to say slave?"

"I was about to say serenade…"

"Master and Serenade?" Sounded like the title of a crappy musical maid anime. "No, I mean, of course I know you're onmyoji and shikigami…but look, Ononoki calls you 'Big Sis,' right?"

"That she does."

"So I just kind of wondered if you guys had a sisterly relationship."

"Well, when it comes to it, I reckon she calls most people big brother or big sister."

She calls Oshino "Big Brother Oshino," and she calls Kaiki "Big Brother Kaiki."

"'Course, she does call Ms. Gaen 'Ms. Gaen,' but she's an exception."

"I see–but."

Calling Kaiki "big brother"?

Bold…

"She calls you plain old 'Big Sis,' though. And me, she just calls 'kind monster sir,' or 'monstieur' for short."

I cannot *believe* that nickname has stuck.

“But you’re the only one who’s just ‘Big Sis.’”

“Hmm.”

Finally getting the point of my more or less pointless question–Ms. Kagenui lapsed into a pregnant silence. Or, I thought she lapsed into silence. I thought so, and in fact she did, but she did something else at the same time–she leapt from atop the stone lantern.

So suddenly that for a second I saw an afterimage, her motion faster than the human eye could follow–I say she leapt, but from my perspective it was more like she just vanished.

Which stands to reason.

Since the place she leapt to was the top of my head–she was squatting just like she’d been squatting on the stone lantern, but now on the crown of my head.

“Um, Ms. Kagenui?”

It had really bummed Shinobu out that time Ms. Kagenui had landed on her head, and now I understood: having someone sitting on your head really does carry a piquant feeling of defeat, distinct from simple humiliation…

And thus was Araragi awakened to a new fetish.

Then again, she was nullifying her weight as she had on that previous occasion, so it’s not like she was a burden or anything…but isn’t manipulating your weight usually a skill for aberrations, like Shinobu?

Ononoki just explained away this habit of Ms. Kagenui’s with one word: “special”…

“An impressive reading–or intuition, maybe? I expect you must be acing the multiple-choice sections of your practice exams.”

“Nice of you to say so, but it’s just the opposite.”

“Hmm. Well, I reckon getting them all wrong is just as amazing, statistically speaking.”

“I don’t need that kind of amazingness in my life.”

“So, what do you think?”

“What do I think? Right, well, I’m really hoping your backstory is that the doll you and Oshino and Kaiki and Tadatsuru Teori used as the prototype, the model, for making Ononoki was fashioned out of the corpse of your actual little sister.”

“I’ll thank you kindly not to foist such a heavy past on a body.”

She ground her heel into my head.

It hurt.

True, while pain is pain, I have to say I got off lightly given how horrible my hope, I mean my conjecture, had been.

“Well, you guys don’t look like sisters anyway–though Ononoki has no facial expression, so it’s kind of hard to tell. Since expressions are even more important than faces in determining whether people look alike–”

“Ha. If that’s your deduction, you haven’t a lick of intuition after all. At this rate I’ll warrant it’s a sure thing you fail your entrance exam.”

“I mean, Ononoki’s origins and what not definitely won’t be on the exam.”

“Hm. Well, it’s nothing what needs hiding, I might as well tell you, but–” Atop my head, Ms. Kagenui looked to be giving it some thought–she was on top of my head, so I couldn’t actually see what

she was doing. “–I dunno. Being asked all formal-like, it makes a body feel snooty. Not sure I want to tell you now.”

“…”

Whaaat.

Since Ms. Kagenui was such a straight shooter, I’d been under the assumption (in addition to being under her) that she wouldn’t try to extort money from me every time I asked a question, but I seemed to have accidentally brought out her contrary side.

Makes sense…

No way someone in the same cohort as Oshino and Kaiki would be a straight shooter through and through–not wanting to answer formal questions is an easy-to-understand disposition in its own way, though not an easy one to get along with.

If only I’d asked more casually.

If only I’d woven it in there with the rest of my barrage of questions–especially since she was all too happy to acquiesce to my request for a sparring match without even a guess as to the reason.

“So, you won’t tell me?”

“I never said that. Nor do I have any intention of squeezing you for work or money in return, so don’t you worry your pretty little head. By the by–how’s about the rest of our battle?”

“Huh?”

The rest of our battle?

Don’t be ridiculous.

Wasn’t our battle already…

“What, are you saying that if I beat you, you’ll tell me the truth about Ononoki? Because hold on a second there, that’s crazy, by which I mean, batshit bonkers…”

I’d sooner pay Oshino five million yen, or let Kaiki fleece me for every last red cent–based on my experience over the summer, and my experience of this duel, I was dead sure that I could never beat her in a billion years.

A billion years.

Even a vampire can’t live that long.

If I’m being honest, I did have a pretty strong interest in my housemate Ononoki’s origins, but I didn’t want to know badly enough to throw my life away when it’d just been spared.

“Hold your horses, I wasn’t fixing to suggest any such thing. I’d not demand that you do something no one else has ever accomplished.”

“…”

Wait.

Was she lifetime undefeated?

When Shinobu and I challenged her, did she just let us off the hook?

What a precarious path I’ve been treading…

“Once is enough,” said the lifetime-undefeated expert.

Still atop my head.

“If you go toe to toe with me–and hit me even once, I’ll give you the skinny on Ononoki.”

“And that’s why it’s your turn, Karen!”

“Um…what’s why what’s what?”

I thought I could win her over with enthusiasm, but apparently the magic formula “and that’s why” doesn’t work on Karen–after I got home.

I called her to my room and immediately got right to the heart of the matter. My other little sister Tsukihi was, at present, playing with Ononoki in the next room.

Ononoki was nothing more than a doll as far as Tsukihi was concerned, so the playing “with” takes on something of a different meaning, but either way, considering their relationship and how fate had brought them together, it was a pretty unsettling combination for a playdate.

I could’ve just asked Ononoki herself before bringing the matter to Karen, but it felt kind of against the rules to ask the chattel something that her owner wouldn’t tell me.

This seemed like it might be a good time to apply my principle of not acting on impulse–in other words, questions should be asked of the people you should ask them of.

Though Ononoki (in her present character) was pretty uncooperative in her own way, so I didn’t think she’d tell me even if I asked her…

Plus, someone whose “life began when Big Sis brought me back from the dead” might not even have a handle on the truth.

“It doesn’t matter, Karen. There’s a reason why I can’t tell you the whole story, but there’s this person who’s as strong as a demon, who I’m basically helpless against, and I just want to land a single punch. Isn’t there some good way of doing that?”

“What do you take me for, bro…” Karen looked dubious–and when I say dubious, I mean annoyed. “I’m a martial artist who follows the way of the martial arts. Even if I did know some method

for exercising violence, I'd never teach it to a novice like you. Not based on such a half-assed explanation, anyway."

"Don't be like that. From now on, I'll fondle your boobies whenever you want."

"Yeah? I see. Well, in that case, I'm ready to entertain the not…on your life! I don't ever want you to fondle my boobies!"

She flew into a rage.

Man is she short-tempered.

As her older brother, it's very embarrassing.

"No, think about it, Karen. Which would you prefer: having your big brother fondle your boobies whenever you want, or having him fondle them whenever you don't want?"

"Hm? Oh, definitely when I do want! No contest! You really are smart, big brother!"

"…"

You really are stupid, Karen.

As her older brother, it's very worrisome.

"It's settled, then. I have a policy of not taking on disciples, but I'll make an exception for you, big brother. You can be my brotégé. Wait, did I say that right? Now I'm all confused!"

"It's *protégé,* obviously. Though I'm not talking about becoming your disciple… If it were you, what would you do? If you wanted to land a single punch on an opponent who's clearly stronger than you–what would you do?"

"Can't be done!" she answered peppily.

Why so peppy.

“No, seriously,” she insisted. “I say this without knowing all the details, but judging from your request, landing even a single punch against that opponent is going to be tough, right? Landing any at all through their guard, let alone a clean hit, right?”

“Uh huh. Like I said, I’m helpless.”

“If there’s such a big gap in ability, you shouldn’t fight. The true martial artist runs away from an opponent like that.”

“…”

Karen’s words were totally reasonable.

And yet, I’ve witnessed her rush in blindly millions of times against opponents she had no hope of beating–and every time, it’s been do-or-die trying to restrain her. I mean that literally, if I didn’t do, someone was going to die.

Do as I say and not as I do, but man, she really was dispensing advice she’d never be able to take herself.

“Then there’s always the question of what’ll happen afterwards, even if you do somehow land a punch. Like, if you land a lucky hit against an opponent whose superiority is clearly clear and they get pissed off, then what? They’ll probably retaliate and beat the shit out of you.”

“Hmm…you’re definitely not wrong.”

Even supposing I managed to land a blow on Ms. Kagenui by some fluke, she’s not the type to clap me on the shoulder and say, “Nicely done!” More likely she’d say, “What the fuck!” and tear my arm off at the shoulder.

I only have the most general sense of Ms. Kagenui as a person…but somehow felt like the risk was too great for the information I was after. Yeah, scheming to try and hit her when she might not even keep her promise…

The wiser course of action might be to forget about going along with Ms. Kagenui's suggestion, which was only a game to her anyway, and just beg her, groveling and scraping with my hands pressed together, to "forget about all that and tell meee!"…

Hm.

"Karen. What would you do? If there were someone you wanted to hit no matter what."

"Someone like you, you mean?"

"No, someone bad, like the polar opposite of me. If you were facing someone like that, who you knew you had no hope against, how would you approach it? Does anything strike you?"

"I told you. Nothing strikes me, and nothing's going to strike them, either. If anything, well, I'd say you should take the long view. Start training, so you can beat them somewhere down the line."

"Training…"

I was a little short on patience to take the long view…

I didn't care enough about learning about Ononoki's past to train to become a fighter–okay, the whole reason I went to see Ms. Kagenui in the first place was that I wanted to learn to fight with my mortal body, so there was a certain overall consistency there, but…

"Once you land a hit the battle's begun, so you have to go into it intending to win," Karen said. "A lethal blow would be another story–but if you're good enough that you can kill someone with one punch, then the fighting part shouldn't be a problem in the first place."

"Hmm, when you think about it like that, ultimately the martial arts are a set of skills for becoming stronger than your opponent, a technique for becoming stronger than the strong, rather than a way for the weak to defeat the strong–"

“My sensei always says that as long as you still think of the martial arts as a technique, you’ll never become strong. And, well, that’s the unavoidable reality, because in the end the mindset we seek in martial arts is that with great power comes great responsibility. Which is why I cleave to justice.”

“And when someone shows up who you can’t cleave with that justice?”

“There’s no one who can’t be. My justice is a waterjet cutter!”

“You’re a slippery one, aren’t you…”

I thought you guys were the *Fire* Sisters.

Though lately my little sisters have been acting independently most of the time.

They’re going to be in high school soon… Terrifying.

Then it struck me. Even if I got Karen to reveal the innermost mysteries of karate to me, there was definitely the danger that when I showcased them for Ms. Kagenui, she’d just beat the living shit out of me instead of telling me about Ononoki. But that assumed the kind of power gap, the kind of disparity that existed between me and Ms. Kagenui.

Did I necessarily have to be the one to hit her, though? No, I could bring in a ringer.

What if I got this waterjet cutter here to stand in for me–I couldn’t let Ms. Kagenui get anywhere near Tsukihi, but she and Karen had somehow passed like ships in the night that one time.

In which case, how about.

“Hey, Karen.”

“What is it, brother.”

“Feel like fighting on my behalf?”

“Nope.”

Didn’t even have to think about it for a second.

“How could I beat an opponent that my big brother couldn’t even touch?”

“…”

Your confidence in your big brother is frighteningly misplaced.

“I mean, from everything you’ve told me, big brother, there’s some person who’s going to answer some question for you if you can hit them, right?”

“Mm-hm, exactly. You’re really on the ball, aren’t you, Karen.”

“Don’t you think this person was just letting you down easy?”

“…”

“Like, you asked an impertinent question, didn’t you? So don’t you think this person was just putting you off without ruffling any feathers? I guess you could call it the ol’ bait-and-switch… All of a sudden you’re entirely focused on hitting your opponent instead of thinking about whether or not your question is going to get answered, right?”

“Damn…”

I was at a loss for words.

Loss in a very visceral sense, like the loss of a relative–it was such a shock that I felt like I might never speak another word for the rest of my life.

A loss so mournful that it seemed like the scene where I got my speech back should be the moving climax of the story–there were two reasons for this shock.

Well, the two reasons were virtually identical, but two big reasons above and beyond the shock of having fallen for that kind of bait-and-switch.

First, there was the embarrassment of having this pointed out to me by my little sister Karen Araragi, who I had heretofore thought was made entirely of muscle, right down to her brain, or even her soul–the shock of shame, in other words. Then there was the shock of having that casual, almost considerate bait-and-switch, almost like a magician's sleight of hand, pulled on me by none other than Ms. Kagenui.

To think that Yozuru Kagenui, a walking tempest who always tries to solve everything with violence, would do something like that–at some point I had likened Shinobu to a hurricane, but Ms. Kagenui was a calamity with the potential to do even more damage. That's how dangerous she was, and yet.

"…"

Well.

Maybe it was precisely because she was that kind of person that Karen had been able to see through the stratagem–

"I see…so that's Ms. Kagenui's version of acting like an adult…"

Unlike Oshino and Kaiki.

By turning my indiscreet question into a game, she wrapped things up without making them awkward–no.

Maybe my question had been so "intrusive" that instead of leaping straight into solving the situation with violence, she'd had to opt for that kind of street-smart "adult behavior."

"But if that's true, what am I supposed to do about it?" I asked Karen.

Thoroughly dispirited by my own rashness, that is, by the fact that I'd once again acted on impulse, I equally thoroughly put myself in Karen's hands.

At this point I idolized my little sister Karen as my savior.

"How the hell should I know? Figure it out for yourself."

"…"

My savior was cold.

"But yeah, if someone showed me that kind of consideration, forced that kind of consideration on me, I'd do my best not to embarrass her. At the very least, I'd try not to let it come out that I'd consulted my exemplary little sister about it and figured out that the whole challenge idea was just a pretext."

"Not sure who this exemplary sister you're talking about is, but well, yeah. It'd be pretty uncouth to point that out."

Pretending not to consider someone's casual consideration. Sounds like something Kanbaru would do.

Maybe that was what I needed to do at this point–but then, could I?

"If I pretend not to have considered it, I'm still headed for a showdown… In other words, I'm challenging her to a pointless fight I know I have no hope of winning, and I'm gonna get the shit beaten out of me…"

"Too bad. Go get the shit beaten out of you."

"You don't have any interest in keeping your big brother safe?"

"The only thing I'm interested in is keeping my big brother honest."

"What if he honestly doesn't want to get the shit beaten out of him?"

And my honesty aside, if I tried to hide my intention to return the favor–by which I mean Ms. Kagenui's casual consideration, I really was going to need some kind of pretext when I faced her.

I couldn't rush blindly into battle without preparing some possible means of success; she'd suspect that I'd come intending to throw the match. But she also wasn't the type of person to just let it go if I gave up and said, *I've decided to forget about our challenge.*

Even if she were, I didn't want to embarrass her.

"…"

What a mind-fuck.

Did I actually have to figure out a way to try to land a blow, not in order to win–but to lose convincingly?

I had to come up with a way to win, but mustn't win that way? Why was I stuck doing all this cloak-and-dagger maneuvering?

It was like getting a question wrong on purpose to keep the class average from going up too much… If this was the price of acting on impulse, it was too steep for me.

"Looks like a body's come to the end of the line, as she would say."

"Your body's come to the end of the line? Wow, you mastered the martial arts just like that, big brother?"

What a dumbass.

And this dumbass was the one who'd pointed out how insensitive I'd been.

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

So how did I fix this blunder, you ask–how did I put together an ersatz strategy for victory?

Well, it was nothing to be proud of.

It's not like there's all that much variation in my patterns of thought and behavior–I decided to retread the way I took on Ms. Kagenui over summer break.

Even if it's a little late at this point, I'll give a quick summary for those of you who don't know what I'm talking about: One day over the summer, in order to challenge Ms. Kagenui, I let the legendary vampire Shinobu Oshino, or what's left of her anyway, drink my blood…thereby mutually raising our vampiric levels and strengthening myself (and her).

The thing is.

However much I may have raised my skill as a vampire, I was shockingly helpless in the face of Ms. Kagenui, specialist in immortal aberrations–nevertheless, that had been the best option available to me.

The worst, but at the same time, the best.

So if there were no restrictions, letting Shinobu drink even more of my blood and powering myself up to face Ms. Kagenui would be my "ace in the hole," a "no-brainer," an obvious choice for how to defeat her at this game she cooked up–but this time I couldn't use that plan as such.

I could no longer turn myself into a vampire–and Ms. Kagenui knew it. So if I pretended that I had, then yeah, it would only make the beating I received that much worse.

And anyway, if I gave any sign of becoming more vampiricized than I already was, as an expert–as an expert who takes down immortal aberrations in the name of justice, Ms. Kagenui would obliterate me without fail.

The fact that she let me go over summer break was nothing short of a miracle–since she's fundamentally not one for sob stories.

Since she's a pro.

So vampiricization was off the table, even as a strategy for losing–but the possibility of having Shinobu exercise her power on my behalf, well, that idea was alive and well.

Her power to manifest matter, specifically.

One of Shinobu's fabulous abilities (fabilities, I like to call them) is that she can completely ignore the laws of conservation, of energy and mass, to construct at will, out of shadows and darkness, anything that she's able to imagine–and so, on this occasion I had her make me a pistol.

A handgun.

A firearm.

Woo-hoo!

I don't care how strong Ms. Kagenui is. With a gun, beating her will be a cinch!

Yeah right.

I wouldn't even be able to beat her with a bazooka–a silver bullet might kill her if she were a vampire, but no matter what kind of bullet I used, nothing was going to penetrate Ms. Kagenui's defenses, let alone kill her.

I went with the gun idea in spite of all this for purely rhetorical reasons–"hit," she had said.

If I hit her even once–it would do.

So it shouldn't matter if I hit her with my fist, or with a bullet!

Exactly the kind of rash impulse a complete idiot like myself would act on–and crucially, it was one hundred percent destined to fail.

It was extremely convincing as bad ideas go–once I pulled the trigger, the bullet wouldn't even graze Ms. Kagenui.

A moronic high schooler with a moronic little sister played a game and lost–end of story. As a spur-of-the-moment response to her casual consideration…no, as a blunder in response to a mishap, I'd say it deserved a passing grade.

Which is how I ended up going to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine the next day with a pistol in my hand (a pretty strange pistol, since Shinobu had just kind of thrown together the design, somewhere between an automatic and a revolver).

It was pretty dangerous putting a pistol in the hands of a foolhardy guy like me, even if I do say so myself, but we'll leave that aside. I still wanted to know about the relationship between Yozuru Kagenui and Yotsugi Ononoki, that hadn't changed…but probably best to put that off a little longer until some other things were tidied up.

My not very reliable intuition, however–informed me that Ms. Kagenui's habit of never setting foot on the ground might have something to do with Ononoki.

Just as I paid dearly for having Shinobu by my side–couldn't I maybe ask her about that, at least?

If I could just find out that one thing.

I could settle down a tiny bit and face my exams–that was my thinking, anyway.

But when I arrived at the grounds of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, I discovered that my not very reliable intuition had failed me

again–though not on the subject of Ms. Kagenui and Ononoki's relationship.

"What the…"

The grounds of that shrine without a god.

That empty, forsaken hangout for aberrations–where just the building, just the facilities had been renewed.

Was deserted–the strongest woman I'd ever met, the lifetime-undefeated expert Yozuru Kagenui, was gone.

Vanished, without a trace.

"What the?"

Impossible, she'd never leave without saying some kind of goodbye–never mind leaving Ononoki behind.

"What the…"

To be continued.

CHAPTER TWELVE
KOYOMI DEAD

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

3
March

I don’t know what Izuko Gaen thinks about roads–that is to say, I don’t know anything about her. I don’t know anything about that woman who goes around brazenly pronouncing, pompously declaring that she knows everything–I know that she’s Mèmè Oshino, Deishu Kaiki, and Yozuru Kagenui’s “senpai,” and that she’s Suruga Kanbaru’s “aunt,” but that’s about it. If you can call that level of knowledge “knowing” someone, then I guess I know pretty much everyone.

Then again, all it takes to become friends with someone in modern society is knowing their screen name and cell number, so in that sense she and I are perfectly well acquainted. And above all, Izuko Gaen does refer to me as her “friend.”

Even though she doesn’t really know me very well.

Or does she?

Maybe she knows me–the same way she knows everything?

If so–well, that wouldn’t be all that surprising.

It wouldn’t be a surprise if I took up a tiny micro-percent of her vast array of knowledge–but that would mean that she has a handle on me, which isn’t necessarily a good feeling.

Because unlike Tsubasa Hanekawa, when she has a handle on something it’s more like she has command of it–and that right there is the difference between Hanekawa, who “only knows what she knows,” and Izuko Gaen, who “knows everything.”

An analogy to shogi should make things clear.

I may have a basic knowledge of how the individual pieces move, of how I can move them–but Hanekawa understands the sum of her forces as an “army.” That’s having a handle on things–the ability to connect and synthesize knowledge.

The ability to link pieces of knowledge with one another.

That’s what it means to be an intellectual.

You could also call it the difference between trivia and knowledge–but Izuko Gaen doesn’t just understand her own forces, she understands the enemy’s as well–though her view isn’t so unilateral as to see the other camp as an enemy at all. She sees the pieces lined up on both sides of the board as a single collective “army”–a unified “unit.”

And that’s what it means to have command of something.

To have it in the palm of your hand.

To hold its fate in your hands.

In one sense that means that she’s the kind of all-around shogi player who can sit on either side of the table, who can go first or second, and it doesn’t matter–but being seen as “one of them” by someone like that goes beyond “not necessarily a good feeling,” it’s full-on creepy. Because even if she calls you a “friend,” that only means that you’re a five-sided piece with the word “friend” on it.

Friends can be useful.

The path of friendship has a certain utility.

That’s all.

Which is to say, nothing more than that.

Then again, I don’t know how the “friend” piece moves–

“The solution is for you to die.”

“Huh?”

“Sacrifice your rook to strike at the king–is not what I mean, though.”

“Huh? Huh?”

“Don’t worry, it’ll only hurt for an instant,” Ms. Gaen said as she swung her sword.

I felt like I’d seen that sword before.

No, not quite–not at all. I’d never seen that particular sword before in my life, but it resembled one with which I was familiar.

Resembled?

That’s not right either.

That makes it sound like the one I know is the real thing–but the sword I’d seen in the past, that I’d known in the past, that I’d cut and been cut with, that was the replica.

While the katana she was presently swinging–was the real deal.

A katana–known as the Aberration Slayer.

The Aberration Slayer.

The original Aberration Slayer, supposed to have vanished long, long ago.

That katana.

That real-deal katana–slashed through me.

Through my fingers, my wrists, my elbows, my biceps, my shoulders, my ankles, my shins, my knees, my thighs, my hips, my waist, my belly, my chest, my collarbones, my neck, my throat, my jaw, my nose, my eyes, my brain, my scalp–it cut all of them.

Into slices.

In an instant.

I tried to scream–but my mouth, my throat, my lungs, had all been sliced into rings like the kind you use for a ring toss.

The instant part hadn’t been a lie, but Ms. Gaen had told one, and a whopper at that–because that sword moves so fast.

So blazingly fast.

That I didn't feel any pain at all.

Backtracking.

Backtracking in time–and going back up that mountain track.

Early on the morning of the thirteenth of March, the day of the entrance exam for the school I hoped to attend, I climbed the steps to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine where it sat atop the crest of the mountain–as had been my habit for the past month or so.

Habit.

Though if you do something every single day, maybe it's more of a routine?

Well, since I was basically hiking, or maybe trail-running, every day, it was good for my health–but the reason I stuck to my routine so readily, without even thinking about it, even on the day that was going to decide the course of my future, might actually be that I'm a diligent guy.

Being diligent isn't necessarily a virtue, though, and in this case maybe I just didn't know when to quit and got dragged along by force of habit…

In this case maybe my habit was a bad one–more vice than virtue.

In fact, Tsubasa Hanekawa, whose level of diligence, whose diligence strength, is much stronger than mine, had told me that there was no point in searching Kita-Shirahebi Shrine anymore, that if I was going to search I should do it someplace else–and Ononoki never even seemed concerned about it in the first place, but for me, it was one more thing I couldn't quit… Against my better judgment,

or maybe just indifferent to it, I kept on going to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine every day.

Visiting the precincts of that shrine where there was no longer any god.

And of course no middle school girl.

And–no expert.

“Well, not knowing when to give up the ghost seems pretty natural for a vampire–”

Being immortal and all.

Though in my case I wasn’t immortal, I just didn’t have a reflection–an utterly useless, and in fact pretty annoying, undead trait to possess.

Anyway, that was about the size of things.

Yozuru Kagenui had vanished from Kita-Shirahebi Shrine–suddenly, without so much as a fare-thee-well, and in the blink of an eye just about an entire month had passed.

Without incident.

Uneventfully.

Under the circumstances, it seemed correct to assume that, having finished her business in this town and lacking a fixed abode to begin with, Ms. Kagenui–like Oshino–simply drifted on. But that wasn’t the case.

No way.

No, unlike Oshino, Ms. Kagenui hadn’t done any of the things she was here to do–though I say that based only on my own limited knowledge and narrow view of the situation, so maybe she had after all. Maybe she’d finished whatever she came to do… Knowing her,

maybe she'd taken down some great evil in the course of that single night before she disappeared, but even if she had.

Ms. Kagenui–the onmyoji Yozuru Kagenui.

Would never leave her familiar Yotsugi Ononoki behind.

"Wouldn't she, though? Big Sis is pretty all over the place when it comes to that kind of thing. One time she left me in the bottom of a ravine in the middle of nowhere and forgot all about me."

Well.

Ononoki herself might say so…and I'm truly stumped as to how she could forget her at the bottom of a ravine, but…

"Even so, even if Big Sis would leave me at the bottom of a ravine, I don't think she'd leave me at your house, Monstieur…"

I was a little upset that my house was being compared unfavorably with a place as dangerous as the bottom of a ravine, but anyway, Ononoki had her doubts too.

Though she really didn't seem concerned.

True–for me it goes without saying, but even Ononoki wasn't enough of a badass to be in any position to be concerned about Ms. Kagenui.

Ms. Kagenui was, in a certain sense, a more fearsome person than either Oshino or Kaiki–probably the only individual in the world who could solve anything and everything through violence.

Why would someone like me be concerned about her? Could I be? Didn't she just leave on a whim? After all, all she did was break her promise to meet me at the shrine.

…And then never come back.

I'd tried telling myself this a million times in the ensuing month, but I didn't know when to quit, didn't know when to give up, didn't

know when to sist and decease–and I ended up visiting the shrine every day. Almost like I was making a hundred-day pilgrimage.

“Wait, sist and decease doesn’t sound right, now that I think about it…”

Uh oh.

Today’s the exam, and I’m losing my confidence–well, anyway, Senjogahara got recruited so she’s all set for college, and she said she’d escort me to the campus for the exam, so I’d better get back down the mountain in time to meet up with her.

The fact that she thinks I need an escort means she doesn’t have much faith in me, but thus spake Senjogahara: “Look, you know the expression ‘the wayward dog will meet the rod’? Well, the wayward Araragi always seems to meet an aberration.”

Wiser words were never spoken.

That’s my sweetheart, always keeping her eye on the ball–and keeping an eye on me.

“Your scores are already good enough to pass, and as long as you can avoid missing the exam itself, campus life is within your reach.”

That’s what she said.

I didn’t know how much to believe the part about being good enough to pass, but if she was more worried about me failing to take the exam than about how I’d do on it–I must’ve been responsible for leading a pretty irresponsible life.

Well.

Going mountain climbing on the morning of my exam *was* pretty damn irresponsible–

“And after the exam, it’s finally graduation time, huh? Can’t wait to see how this turns out,” I muttered to myself as I climbed the now

thoroughly familiar and not particularly burdensome steps. Shinobu was there inside my shadow, of course, but apparently she was pretending to have gone to bed early, so there was no reply–since Shinobu and I were together 24/7, strictly speaking I guess I never said anything just “to myself,” but well, if she wasn’t listening, then close enough.

Can’t wait to see how this turns out–by no means implied some kind of rosy outlook for my future. When you get right down to it, the implication was more one of despair, that it might be impossible for me to lead anything like a normal campus life in the first place.

A campus life or any other kind of normal lifestyle, given my close association with an aberration, and being somewhat of an aberration myself–me, oh my.

It’s not like I was relying on her, but in that regard it was pretty discouraging when Ms. Kagenui disappeared–it had been a real support to have her there to talk to when I realized that I, myself, was an aberration.

The fact that that support had been completely removed.

Was perhaps another reason I was making this daily pilgrimage–maybe I was just pretending to be worried about Ms. Kagenui, like it was no big deal, and really I was just worried about my own precious self.

It’s not like she’d done much of anything about the transmogrification of my body, nor was she going to…but her oddly bold, supremely self-confident attitude was a comfort to be around–as one would expect of a self-proclaimed champion of justice, she never wavered.

There was some overlap with Karen in that regard–no, it was more than that.

In being constrained never to set foot on the ground thanks to some curse I don't know anything about, yet managing to keep her cool and live her life, Ms. Kagenui might've become a kind of role model to me–so if that "cool" could possibly come under threat, it was no wonder I was scared.

"Though…it's hard to imagine who, or what, could threaten her in the first place…and even supposing there was such a thing, there's still the question of why. Could it have something to do with everything that's going on?"

…

Everything that's going on–it was uncertain at present how applicable that phrase really was. Some might argue that the present tense, "going on"–should be replaced with the past tense.

In the month since Ms. Kagenui disappeared, at least, nothing–not a single mysterious thing, has gone on in this town.

A month passed uneventfully, without incident–that's not just a turn of phrase, it's a plain fact.

No aberrations.

And no Darkness.

No urban legends.

No word on the street.

No secondhand gossip.

And obviously no school ghost stories–none of it.

Nor had there been anything Oshino would've been interested in collecting if he'd still been here–nothing mysterious, nothing weird, nothing out of the ordinary.

As if it was all over.

It was as if it was all over.

“I guess if there’s anything at all I can point to, it’d have to be the lingering mystery of why Ms. Kagenui went missing–”

And.

As I got to the top of the steps and went to pass under the torii at the entrance to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine–I saw her.

Standing within the grounds of the shrine.

Smack in the middle of the ceremonial path–striking no particular stance, and with no air of awe or reverence, on that path meant for the gods alone.

In her baggy clothes.

With her hat down over her face–her identity and age impossible to determine at a glance.

“…Ms. Gaen.”

A month without incident.

A daily pilgrimage turned routine.

Well, it seemed like my hundred-day pilgrimage hadn’t turned out to be such a colossal waste of time after all.

Something was about to happen.

Something decisive–or no.

Maybe something was about to stop happening.

“’Sup, Koyomin–g’morning,” said Ms. Gaen.

Ms. Izuko Gaen.

Just a normal greeting, nothing out of the ordinary–I get the sense she greets people like that no matter where or when she runs

into them, whether she's walking down the street or at a shrine on top of a mountain.

It's doubtful anything qualifies as a special location or special circumstance for her–for all I know, maybe nothing in this world is special to her.

Since if you know everything–then everything's the same, it's all blasé.

"Been a while–when did we last see each other? Oh yeah, that time in September, right? Heheh, though I've heard a thing or two about what you've been up to since then."

"…Good morning."

I gave a quick bob of my head.

Well, we'd been through a thing or two ourselves–but basically, I owed her a lot. Just as I did her junior, Oshino.

No.

It wasn't just about returning a favor or something. Insofar as I'd been pretty damn ungrateful–betrayed her, even–I owed her an even larger debt than I did Oshino. Even if I wouldn't go so far as to call it guilt, I can't deny that I felt awkward, or sheepish, around her.

So to be confronted by her like this, without warning–nope, couldn't look her in the eye.

By contrast, Ms. Gaen didn't seem to harbor any ill will whatsoever and was grinning same as she had been the last time we met–though her grin never slips even as she uses, abandons, and bleeds dry the people around her, so that part didn't make me feel any better.

And considering what happened to Sengoku and Hachikuji–Nadeko Sengoku and Mayoi Hachikuji, it wouldn't have

been a surprise if I were angry at her…but some part of me knew that that anger would've been misplaced.

Part of me, but.

"Seems like you went through some serious shit–physically, I mean, Koyomin."

"No…I mean, it wasn't that serious."

"Heheh. Guess you're right, I mean, considering everything you've done, the crazy crisis you've been through, maybe your current physical situation…your state of health, isn't something to be all that worried about. I guess if anyone's situation is serious–"

Ms. Gaen looked behind her.

The only thing behind her at the moment was the brand spanking new shrine building–though it was just an empty structure, with nothing doing in the object-of-worship department.

In which sense, it wasn't all that different from that shed thing I'd made in class way back when–though the carpenters who built the shrine might be pretty offended by the comparison.

"It's Yozuru."

"…"

"Yozuru Kagenui–my dear junior. The very idea that someone would go after her–I mean, this is unexpected. Even for me."

"I didn't think that was possible?"

Go after her.

I couldn't let that flagrant phrase go without some kind of reaction–but hearing the word "unexpected" come out of Ms. Gaen's mouth was way more startling.

No, not startling.

It just seemed like a lie.

“I thought you knew everything.”

“Come on now, you going to be sarcastic towards a friend you haven’t seen in so long? Koyomin. Nobody actually knows everything. That’s just rhetoric. A bit of a bluff, to be honest–”

“…”

I couldn’t get a read on her true intentions.

I also couldn’t figure out what Oshino was thinking most of the time–and Kaiki and Ms. Kagenui were both somewhat unfathomable to me, but she really took the cake, as befitted their senpai.

No…

She was kind of, different, somehow.

Ms. Gaen was unreadable in a different way from Oshino and the rest of them–hers was not the same type of unreadability at all.

Even if I can’t put it clearly into words, the junior class all had something in common–Mèmè Oshino, Deishu Kaiki, Yozuru Kagenui.

I didn’t know what they were thinking.

And so–I couldn’t read them.

But…with Ms. Gaen, it wasn’t just that I didn’t know what she was thinking–I didn’t want to know.

And so–I couldn’t read her.

I wouldn’t read her.

I didn’t want to read her–though I’m not saying I “didn’t want to read her” because her mind was full of abominable malice or something.

On that score, it’s Kaiki’s mind I’d much prefer not to read–it’s simply that the inside of Ms. Gaen’s head is too convoluted and

strange, and if I tried to get a read on it my own brain would blow a gasket.

Which is why.

I didn't want to read Izuko Gaen's true intentions: as a means of self-protection, so to speak–in the same way that no one would choose to take a punch from a heavyweight boxer if they didn't have to.

But…this was maybe a situation in which I did have to.

Coming here like this.

Coming personally to see me–since if she came to see me, there was something she needed to see me about at the very least.

Whatever the case, Ms. Gaen was lying in wait for me, taking it for granted that I'd come to the shrine regardless of the fact that it was the day of my exam, almost as if we shared a Google calendar or something–I would've felt much more at ease if she'd said "there's nothing I don't know" as usual, rather than informing me at this late date that "there are some things I don't know."

In fact…it freaked me out.

Rather than knowing there was something afoot in our little backwater that even Ms. Gaen didn't have a grasp on–I would so much rather believe that *that* part was just rhetorical, just a mean little joke among friends…or plain old humility.

Please let me believe that.

"Don't look at me like that. That's no way to look at a friend, Koyomin–when I say unexpected, well, when you roll a die with 1's on five sides and it comes up 6, that's unexpected, isn't it. You know perfectly well that it's statistically possible for it to come up 6…but one thing I do know is that it's hard for statistically unlikely things to happen."

"…"

"I never would've expected there to be someone who would take action against Yozuru Kagenui, violence personified–which is exactly why I sent her here to cope with the abnormal situation occurring in your body."

"Someone who would take action against her–is a phrase that doesn't sit well with me, I have to say."

In response to this doubt that I nervously, and (in my own way) cautiously raised, Ms. Gaen cocked her head with a theatrical *hm?*

"What do you mean, Koyomin?"

"No, uh…I'm very grateful and everything that you sent Ms. Kagenui here on my behalf."

Yes.

Grateful to the point that I should've thanked her for it the second I saw her–though, with the Ms. Kagenui in question missing at present, maybe I should've apologized instead.

The blame for the fact that Ms. Gaen's junior was currently M.I.A.–could certainly be laid at my feet. At least, if it weren't for me, I doubt Ms. Kagenui would've ever come to this town again.

But right now, more than apologies or gratitude.

I had questions.

"Hahaha, gimme a break, Koyomin. They say a hedge between keeps friendship green, but come on, you and I can dispense with the formalities. So, what do you mean?" Ms. Gaen danced around my words and repeated her question, totally focused on the topic at hand. It felt more like protocol than the art of conversation, though.

“Someone who would take action against her–seems out of line with my impression of Ms. Kagenui. I was just thinking that in her case, it’d have to be more like someone who would take her out.”

“A-ha. Sounds like you’ve got absolute faith in Kagenui’s strength–seeing as you’ve actually fought her, maybe you’re in a position to raise that doubt. You recklessly challenged her over the summer, so in that sense, there was already someone who took action against her.”

“…”

“Come now, you can’t have forgotten about that–but I don’t have quite as much faith in Kagenui’s strength as you seem to. Another thing I know is that there’s always someone better–or rather, that there are no absolutes when it comes to strength. Even if it’s statistically unlikely–you know?”

Ms. Gaen beckoned to me.

Beckoned?

What’s the deal, I wondered, but it seemed like she simply didn’t want to have a conversation with the torii between us.

I girded my loins and passed under it.

Was there someone stronger and more violent than Ms. Kagenui, or was there a way to render her strength ineffective? Ms. Gaen’s words took on a different implication in each case, but regardless…

“Are you saying you can’t believe anyone would take action against Ms. Kagenui given the risk?”

Yes.

I had my doubts on that score.

What would it take for someone to face off with Ms. Kagenui? To face off with violence personified–in my case, my little sister's life had been on the line.

That probably fell under Ms. Gaen's "statistically unlikely" clause… But that was maybe just down to a simple lack of prudence on my part, and I might've opted for a different strategy if I'd known what Ms. Kagenui was capable of. Be that as it may–without Shinobu, I never would've plucked up the courage to take on the violent onmyoji.

And the price I had to pay for relying on Shinobu like that was the loss of my humanity–my physical, if not my mental, humanity, anyway.

…

Yeah. Maybe what I should be trying to work out wasn't the reason someone had taken action against Ms. Kagenui–but the price this supposed someone had paid for doing so.

Someone.

Ms. Gaen used that word, which gave such specificity to its referent, as if it was a given–under normal circumstances, maybe it would just be a figure of speech, or an unimportant, even misleading statement, but since it was Ms. Gaen who said it, I didn't think so.

In other words, any hope that Ms. Kagenui had quit her HQ at the shrine of her own volition was hereby completely–thoroughly eliminated.

Someone–a word you usually use to describe a human being, but which you could also use to describe an aberration–or even something else.

Just what exactly was Ms. Gaen referring to–when she said "someone"?

“Well, as an expert who lives as she does, fighting as she does–there’s no question she has a way of incurring people’s enmity. But she doesn’t invoke justice on a whim, or as an affectation. People may bear grudges against her, but I don’t think anyone does so without justification.”

“…”

As someone with not one but two little sisters who invoke justice on a whim, and as an affectation, that really made my ears burn, or it gave me heartburn.

“In other words, you think that Ms. Kagenui herself wasn’t the source of the trouble.”

“It’s not a question of what I think, Koyomin, that’s just the fact of the matter–by the way, how’s Yotsugi?”

“Huh?”

She changed the subject so suddenly that I was taken off guard–but since it was Ms. Gaen doing it, it must’ve been a necessary protocol, had to be.

I answered her fully aware that it was dangerous to go along with someone’s protocol when you didn’t know where it was heading–or were unable to, not wanting to read her true intention. Obviously Ms. Kagenui was Ononoki’s primary guardian, but in light of Ononoki’s origin, Ms. Gaen was also one of her guardians, broadly speaking–and guardians have the right to know how their charges are doing.

“She’s…doing well. Since she’s totally expressionless, I don’t actually know how she’s feeling about this particular matter…but that girl knows Ms. Kagenui better than anyone. And she doesn’t seem to be concerned–at the moment.”

Judging that there was no need to provide detailed information on her fiendish desire for ice cream and so forth, I summarized Ononoki's status report as such.

I mean, I imagine that's what Ms. Gaen wanted to know.

"Yotsugi knows Kagenui better than anyone? Haha…seems like *you* don't know much of anything, Koyomin."

"Huh?"

"Well, as long as you aren't weirdly pretending to know all about Yotsugi the aberration, then it's all good–"

And incidentally, since I know everything, naturally I know about Yotsugi too, Ms. Gaen said–she's surprisingly self-congratulatory. Though when it comes to Ononoki, she's pretty much right on the money when she says I don't know a damn thing.

We've been living under the same roof for almost a month, but I don't know much about that little tween other than the fact that she likes ice cream. And that information is all but useless.

"Then again, given how your own transformation into an aberration is progressing, it's not like you wouldn't understand someone else just because they were an aberration–though some vision of mutual comprehension based solely on the fact you're both aberrations would be a fantasy."

"Uh huh… Well, Ononoki and Shinobu definitely don't see eye to eye…"

By virtue of which things are currently pretty tense in the Araragi room at the Araragi residence–at first it was constant fighting but now it's more like a cold war, with Ononoki doing her thing during the day and Shinobu remaining nocturnal, keeping out of each other's way and living a life of non-communication.

Honestly it was stressful, and you can imagine how little progress I was making with my exam prep lately–it was down to the wire.

“Not to mention the fact that Yotsugi’s peculiar even among aberrations–being artificial and all.”

“Artificial…”

“I imagine she was even totally calm when she confronted Tadatsuru, right? I tested her once–I made her fight Kagenui.”

Ms. Gaen just tossed off this mind-blower like it was nothing.

“I wondered if she possessed anything like human compassion, you know? At the time I didn’t think it was so unlikely that she might, but she attacked her ‘Big Sis’ without a moment’s hesitation.”

“...”

“The match itself ended with Kagenui victorious, though. It was just like her not to order Yotsugi to stop, even though she could’ve–oh, but don’t worry, Koyomin. I’m not telling you this all of a sudden because I think Yotsugi Ononoki is the cause, the culprit, behind Kagenui’s disappearance or anything.”

Such a suspicion had only barely crossed the back of my mind, but Ms. Gaen quickly brushed it away–the combination of nonchalance and a zero tolerance for wasted action reminded me of the kind of shogi problems they set in the newspaper.

“Since she wouldn’t make a move like that unless she was ordered to–unless she was directed to.”

“Sure–I guess you’re right.”

The fact that she purposely phrased it that way, that she said Ononoki wouldn’t *make a move,* demonstrated that Ms. Gaen wasn’t completely denying her individuality, her free will–but looking back on how Ononoki had seemed when she confronted, when she took on Tadatsuru… Ms. Gaen definitely seemed to be onto something.

Just as Ononoki has no expression.

She has no emotion–and so, of course, no compassion.

“Then again, that’s exactly why–Kagenui was removed.”

“Uh…removed?”

I was getting fed up with reacting like that to every word Ms. Gaen said–I may not be able to read her intentions, but I’d rather retain my composure and dignity while I was facing her.

Was that impossible without the gravitas of, say, a Hanekawa? Though it beggars the imagination to try and picture the two of them having a conversation.

“What do you mean, removed?”

“Like I said, Kagenui’s disappearance has nothing to do with Kagenui herself, Koyomin–she was essentially unconnected to the series of stories that unfolded in this town. She almost got involved on account of your little sister, but that was avoided thanks to your efforts.”

More declined than avoided, really, glossed Ms. Gaen. “Which is precisely why I sent her in this time…but I guess the problem was more deep-seated than I expected.”

“Even if it was more–more deep-seated than you expected, I’m sure you *knew* about it?”

“Don’t take it out on me, Koyomin–it’s not like I’m not broken up too, my adorable junior was your collateral damage.”

“…”

“Kagenui may have been collateral damage, but it was Kaiki who got entangled in it–I really do wonder what happened to him. There’s a mess of intel, and I know all of it–but the problem is that

it’s probably all false. He probably spread most of that himself, though–a wayward junior is a senpai’s woe. As for Oshino–haha.”

Ms. Gaen started to say something about him, but lightly laughed it off. As far as I was concerned, there was nothing to laugh about–whether she was talking about Oshino, which goes without saying, or Ms. Kagenui, naturally, but even Kaiki.

“Hm? No, no, Kaiki gets what he deserves, so don’t let that bother you–though given your nature, Koyomin, I imagine that’s impossible. But really, don’t let it bother you. Nor Oshino–but as far as Kagenui is concerned, let me make something clear right now, for the sake of the future. For the sake of your future, Koyomin, and that of this town.”

“My…future?”

“Mm-hm. For your sake, now and to come. Though when it comes to the town…that’s not all on you. The reason Kagenui was removed,” said Ms. Gaen, “was simply that she was in the way–not Yozuru Kagenui herself, but her familiar Yotsugi Ononoki. The very Yotsugi Ononoki–who’s been installed by your side, Koyomin. Point is, in order to render that shikigami, that tsukumogami, that little doll, powerless and ineffectual, her master was dealt with. Yotsugi Ononoki, a shikigami who does exactly as directed, who only follows orders. If her master, the person at the top of the chain of command, is gone, then that dashing-look tween is nothing to fear–”

Dealt with.

That blunt expression–panicked me.

Pained me.

“Ms. Gaen…what do you mean, dealt with?”

“Dealt with. Though I doubt Kagenui, for her part, would feel things had been dealt with satisfactorily–well, strictly speaking she

wasn't here on business, so it wouldn't be fair to take her to task for that."

By "here," I assume she meant both Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, and, in a broader sense, the town as a whole.

Ms. Kagenui's "business"–her business as an expert, had been about eighty percent wrapped up the moment she gave her opinion on my physical abnormality. The subsequent stuff with Tadatsuru was just something she might as well look into since she was already here, and staying in our town even afterwards was simply irregular.

"Private business, you might say–personal interest, not professional. Though curiosity…is not something that motivates her, is it. Well, there's no question that the presence of Tadatsuru, motivated as he is by aesthetic rather than intellectual curiosity, made her a little sentimental… There's no way she stayed here because she was worried about Yotsugi being at your house, Koyomin…or at least I'd like to think not."

That's what you'd like to think, huh?

Don't try to tell me it's "unlikely but conceivable," Ms. Gaen.

"Sending Yotsugi to your place kept things unpredictable, Koyomin, not to mention that, as a purely artificial aberration, she could protect you–but apparently there was someone who wouldn't stand for that."

"Wouldn't stand for it…"

Someone.

"Yet, *they* still couldn't take action against Yotsugi herself–because she's a purely artificial aberration. And so they took action against her master. The reason there was someone who took action against her–the reason someone took action against her, was this."

Someone.

Someone who wouldn't stand for it–someone who took action against her.

Ms. Gaen kept repeating these phrases–almost like she was trying to implant some kind of suggestion in me.

"We can divide the subsequent story into roughly two possible paths: Yotsugi is rendered powerless as planned, and remains by your side as a meaningless bodyguard–or she surprises us by awakening to her humanity and tries to protect your bonkers-ass self of her own free will, Koyomin…losing sight of her proper role as an aberration in the process."

"…"

"I don't need to tell you what happens if she loses sight of her role as an aberration, right, Koyomin? Since you've seen the consequences of that with your own two eyes–"

In that case.

Yotsugi Ononoki will no longer be a purely artificial aberration–and she'll become vulnerable to any action taken against her, she'll no longer be anything to fear.

Ms. Gaen concluded her lecture–once she explained it that way, I finally got it, and Ms. Kagenui's sudden disappearance also started to make its own kind of sense… Not to mention.

That business with Tadatsuru.

That time, too, there'd been two possible outcomes: I further vampiricize myself in order to rescue the "hostages," or Ononoki comes out swinging to forestall that eventuality–and in so doing displays her full aberrationhood to me.

And with that display.

She destroys the relationship that might've been between us, or that might've grown between us–in the event, it was this latter option that occurred, but that's, how can I put this, that's just about my psychology.

My frame of mind.

Ms. Kagenui averted that state of affairs by having Ononoki come live with me–and that's exactly why this past month passed without incident, one might say.

But speaking of *exactly why.*

That's exactly why Ms. Kagenui was removed–thus transforming Ononoki into nothing more than a doll–by this "someone" Ms. Gaen keeps talking about.

…But I don't get it.

It doesn't quite add up for me–why the hell would anyone go that far? It's almost like they were trying to keep me from doing something…or to make me do something?

Either way, I don't like it.

Feeling like an attack could come at any moment–like they've rigged it so I stand alone.

Starts to make me wonder if the vampirization of my body, my transformation into an aberration, hadn't been planned all along–at the very least, the idea doesn't seem entirely delusional.

Since if it weren't for everything with Sengoku–and this shrine, I wouldn't have relied so heavily on Shinobu–and what about her?

Where does Shinobu stand in all this?

She's more of a bodyguard to me than Ononoki ever–oh, I see. Since I can't rely on Shinobu anymore without exacerbating my

physical transformation into an aberration…in a certain sense, she's been rendered just as powerless as Ononoki.

Since the fact that I can't power myself up.

Means that Shinobu can't power herself up either.

At this point she's the dregs of an aberration, in the truest sense, a shadow of her former self. Just a little blond girl–she can't be my ace in the hole, or even her own.

Neither an ace in the hole nor a sword in the sheath–

"Is Miss Shinobu…"

She seemed to have picked up on the fact that I was thinking about Shinobu–or rather, Ms. Gaen had probably guided my thoughts in that direction.

In fact, she'd been periodically glancing away from me and down at my shadow.

"Fast asleep at the moment, Koyomin?"

"Yeah…lately she's been a total night owl."

I didn't say, *Because of Ononoki.* If anything, Shinobu was avoiding Ononoki more than the other way around–

"She's usually asleep around this time."

"Heheh. Well, I guess that's her version of setting her mind to something–actually bringing her lifestyle closer to her essential nature as an aberration, just in case? Then again, seeing as how she's barely an aberration anymore, seems pretty pointless…and it's not like that's going to allow you to become human again, Koyomin."

Seems like our Miss Shinobu is a real optimist, or should I say hopeful, or…clinging to hope, maybe–said Ms. Gaen. The way she said it sounded somehow sympathetic, but at the same time sober, as if she was just relating a factual truth.

As if she was just relating that Shinobu's actions and whatever passed for Shinobu's feelings were nothing more than a worthless waste of time–though even if that were so, I was in no position to give her a hard time about it, having totally failed to notice Shinobu's uncharacteristic hyper-vigilance on my behalf.

"Not only that–it's liable to get you into an even worse predicament than you're already in, Koyomin."

"Huh? An even worse predicament?"

"Heheh. Though it's not like the current Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, being neither fully immortal nor fully a vampire, could guard you around the clock anyway–tough to prevent an assassination. To put it in shogi terms, that's as crazy as trying to achieve victory without losing a single piece. Even the greatest shogi player of all time playing against a child who doesn't understand the rules couldn't win a game of shogi without losing a single piece. Even a proud, compassionate commander is forced to sacrifice pieces–that's what we're dealing with here, Koyomin."

"Like, trying to protect a pawn and losing your king–that kind of thing?"

"Not necessarily a pawn. They say the fool prizes his rook over his king–but whether it's a rook or a bishop, or even a gold or silver general, sometimes you've got to sacrifice them. The king is the only piece that can never be sacrificed."

"…"

"Shogi's an amazing game when you think about it–even if you lose every piece on the board other than the king, you can still win as long as your king is alive. That's quite a balance for a game, don't you think? It's a good design. Or a good reflection of reality, maybe–now then, Koyomin. Do you think you're the king?"

Caught off guard by the question, I didn't have a chance to think at all before responding reflexively, "Oh, no–not a chance." Maybe I should've given a more considered answer, but I'm not nearly cheery enough to be able to call myself the king. Even if the vampire is the king of aberrations. "The king? That's absurd."

"That's what I thought, you're such a humble guy. And at the moment, there's no king in this town–you're not the king, and neither is Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade. And Nadeko Sengoku–"

Just as she'd done before.

Ms. Gaen turned and looked at the shrine building behind her.

"–is gone."

"…"

"Right now this town's throne is empty–which is causing certain inconveniences. In other words, it's like playing shogi without a king. Haha, I've heard of playing with a handicap of a rook and a bishop, but playing shogi with your king as a handicap is a rare bird. How would you even determine the winner?"

"In that case–no one would win, and no one would lose. Since there wouldn't be any parameters for determining victory or defeat–"

"Exactly, a situation where no one wins and no one loses. That's what you'd call anarchy… It's not like the king has to be the strongest piece, it just has to be there. As long it's there, the land is under control–even if that land is a battlefield."

"Comparing the town to a game of shogi isn't really enlightening me any. Let alone calling it a battlefield," I told her how I honestly felt.

Expressing how I honestly felt was apt to–no, I'm not sure that was how I honestly felt.

Maybe I just didn't want to be sure.

Vacancy.

I'm pretty sure it was–Kaiki who said something about the vacuum that precedes the chaos.

"Though that reminds me, Ms. Kagenui was talking about shogi as well…about how she and Kaiki and Oshino used to compose shogi problems for each other or something."

"Haha. Shogi problems are tough without a king as well."

"But with those, all you need is one king, right? It's okay if the other throne is empty–"

"There are dual-monarch shogi problems too, but that's neither here nor there."

Perhaps instinctively sensing danger, I'd tried to nudge the conversation away from the topic at hand–but Ms. Gaen brooked no such digressions.

"The shogi metaphor was just me being pretentious. I wasn't really trying to make it easier for you to understand," she said.

"…"

"And comparing the king to a god is, well, pretty customary–there's no god piece in shogi, after all. Now, if you'll allow me to continue with what I was saying, Oshino tried to spiritually stabilize this town without filling that vacancy–but I tried to put someone on the throne, even if it was just for show. I entrusted you with that task, Koyomin, and you failed. That's more or less how things went, right?"

“Well…I guess if you want a simple summary, that’s about the size of it. But all the stuff that’s been happening around me hasn’t been quite so simple–”

“Not simple, no, but not complicated, either. Or maybe I should say, it didn’t *end up complicated.* I thought putting Yotsugi by your side would make a good diversion if it went well–but it doesn’t seem to have gone all that well. Kagenui’s AWOL–Kaiki’s in hiding–and no one knows where Oshino is. We’re up against the wall, and the situation is untenable. So I had no choice but to act personally.”

“By act, what do you…”

Ms. Gaen was not one to act unless it was absolutely necessary.

It was the same when she came to our town before.

The fact that she’d been waiting there for me–meant there was some reason she absolutely had to do so. There was no chance in hell she’d come just to give me a nice, thorough explanation of my town’s current state of affairs.

Sure, I might be the kind of completely clueless guy someone would want to give a nice, thorough explanation to–but this particular person would never come all the way here just to do that.

“Casualties are mounting, Koyomin, and I want to put a lid on the situation. So maybe instead of act, I should say I had no choice but to put a stop to it. To stop you, in particular, from acting.”

“Me? No, I mean…I have no intention of acting. And isn’t that why Ms. Kagenui dispatched Ononoki to my place? As a bodyguard-slash…watchdog, or…”

“Yup. So even you managed to figure out that much, huh? But Yotsugi can no longer carry out that task, Koyomin. Now that the chain of command has fallen apart, you know? If Yotsugi can no

longer protect you–then she can't stop you, either. She's literally a puppet."

Uh oh, doesn't the character for puppet have the character for demon in it too?–Ms. Gaen said.

"So *you can act.* You can act, now–and there's no one to stop you. And unfortunately–when you act, *they act.*"

"They?"

"You don't need to worry about who they are. 'Someone,' that's all." Ms. Gaen's words put the kibosh on my train of thought. Then she continued, "The problem is–that it's dangerous for you to act. Or rather, they're waiting for you to act–it's the kind of standoff where the first one to move loses. A dilemma of sorts."

"A dilemma…between what and what?"

"The solution is clear, though it will cause me a smidgen of heartache."

Solution?

Solution, to what?

Sure, all kinds of things had been going on around me–but ultimately, all that stuff got resolved.

Everyone who resolved those things was missing, and that was the problem, but–what action could I take?

"You worried about what it's the solution to? Well, that's got nothing to do with you anymore–"

Ms. Gaen moved.

One step, towards me.

She moved, came towards me–it must have been necessary, of course–but I didn't know why.

I still couldn't read her true intentions.

Right up to the end.

"It's the solution to the problem of the Darkness that's been coiled around this town for so long now–and the solution is for you to die."

"Huh?"

"Sacrifice your rook to strike at the king–is not what I mean, though."

"Huh? Huh?"

"Don't worry, it'll only hurt for an instant," Ms. Gaen said as she swung her sword.

I felt like I'd seen that sword before.

No, not quite–not at all. I'd never seen that particular sword before in my life, but it resembled one with which I was familiar.

Resembled?

That's not right either.

That makes it sound like the one I know is the real thing–the sword I'd seen in the past, that'd I'd known in the past, that I'd cut and been cut with, was the replica.

While the katana she was presently swinging–was the real deal.

A katana–known as the Aberration Slayer.

The Aberration Slayer.

The original Aberration Slayer, supposed to have vanished long, long ago.

That katana.

That real-deal katana–slashed through me.

Through my fingers, my wrists, my elbows, my biceps, my shoulders, my ankles, my shins, my knees, my thighs, my hips, my waist, my belly, my chest, my collarbones, my neck, my throat, my jaw, my nose, my eyes, my brain, my scalp–it cut all of them.

Into slices.

In an instant.

I tried to scream–but my mouth, my throat, my lungs, had all been sliced into rings like the kind you use for a ring toss.

The instant part hadn't been a lie, but Ms. Gaen had told one, and a whopper at that–because that sword moves so fast.

So blazingly fast.

That I didn't feel any pain at all.

"…"

The sword was just suddenly in her hand.

Why does she have the Aberration Slayer?

Without finding out–I was pulverized, and spread about the grounds of the shrine. *Hey, that reminds me, didn't Sengoku do this to a snake at some point–cut it into slices?*

With that recollection.

I, my various component parts, went flying every which way across the grounds.

"It's a shame it had to come to this. I really do feel that way. But I want you to understand that I waited until the last possible moment–I waited until the day of your exam. Once the exam was over, your constraints would've been lifted, and I couldn't be sure how you would act once you were liberated."

I felt like I could hear her voice, but that must've been a delusion–how could I hear it, when my auditory organs and the brain that received their signals had been slashed to ribbons?

"No need to worry that Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade will be restored after your death–maybe that just sounds like empty consolation, but I'll say it anyway. She's already seen that 'future'–that 'world' once before. So that action–that road is blocked. I don't think she could go on that kind of rampage even if she wanted to. There's no path for her to run amok, so even if she did–it'd be suicide."

A suicidal vampire.

Not sure what kind of existence that was for an aberration–at this point I'm not sure if it was appropriate or not–but even if it wasn't, maybe it didn't matter when you were dying anyway? Though it wasn't clear to me whether or not dying and getting swallowed up by the Darkness were the same thing.

"And this I can guarantee is not just empty consolation: I will personally take responsibility for minimizing the shock to your family and lover and friends when I tell them about your death."

Ah.

As long as Ms. Gaen takes responsibility–it's probably fine. Though that said–to devote the vast majority of my time to exam prep over the course of six whole months, and then see that come to nothing…that was a shame.

Just as Senjogahara had said, it wasn't the exam itself that was the real hurdle for a guy like me, it was getting myself to the exam in the first place–and in that, I hadn't made the grade.

So, like cherry blossoms, fell Koyomi Araragi.

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

Punch line?

I mean, isn't me getting sliced up and scattered across the ground in pieces already enough of a punch line?

"…Huh?"

I was alive.

I wasn't dead–the sun was directly overhead.

Which meant that six or so hours had passed, and it was already the middle of the day–instead of being sliced to ribbons, I was splayed out on my back beneath the rays of the noonday sun.

What the hell.

What's going on?

Ms. Gaen's gone.

Without a trace.

What's going on–didn't Ms. Gaen chop me into bits with the Aberration Slayer? Or did my vampiric immortality restore me from the brink of death? No, that's impossible, I didn't give Shinobu any of my blood to drink.

Ms. Gaen had aimed for a time when Shinobu would be asleep so as to prevent even an outside chance of that happening–but even if it had, if my body was possessed of enough immortality to restore itself after being chopped into such tiny pieces, I couldn't survive being out under the sun's rays like that.

It was almost as if–there was an *Aberration Savior* to go along with the Aberration Slayer.

What's happening here?

What the hell is happening–no.

What–*did Ms. Gaen do?*

“Ah, you awake?” A shadow fell over me as I lay there with my arms and legs splayed out, still totally confused. “Or did I wake up the sleeping child–Mister Rock-a-bye-baby?”

“Don’t talk about me like I’m some kind of lullaby, my name is–Araragi,” I spat out reflexively.

At the girl standing over me–a girl with pigtails and a giant backpack.

But the last bit caught in my throat.

Not that I’d forgotten my own name, of course–

“So it is. Sorry, slip of the tongue.”

She grinned as she said this–showing me that sunny smile I had liked, had loved, so much.

That longed-for smile.

I had thought I would never see again–

“And, is the punch line that you failed the entrance exam because you didn’t even make it to the test site, Mister Araragi?”

“Come on, it can’t end with such a lame joke.”

Afterword

The concept of “foreshadowing” is an important element in novels, and in particular mystery novels; to give a crude explanation, it’s basically employed to make the reader think, “Oh, this is what that thing that time was all about!” But you know, it seems to me this sometimes happens in reality as well. *Thinking back on it, this is what was going on;* or, *looking back now, this is what that was;* or, *too late now, but this is what that was all about.* I imagine we’ve all had experiences like that, of reflecting on the past and realizing something along those lines. Which, how can I put this, seems like it’s probably accompanied by a certain amount of regret most of the time–like, *if only I’d noticed earlier, this never would’ve happened*? If foreshadowing ends up making us think, “I should’ve noticed then” or “If I were more observant, I would’ve realized what was going on,” then it makes a certain kind of inevitable sense that it would be accompanied by regret, but I wonder, is every recollection that makes us feel something akin to regret a product of foreshadowing? It certainly doesn’t seem like it. If you’re wondering whether an event in a novel that “in retrospect seems like foreshadowing” actually was foreshadowing, you can ask the author, and if the author is an honest person then he or she might even tell you. But in real life there’s no way of knowing. Human beings are prone to drawing all kinds of connections even where there are none, so depending on one’s interpretation, just about anything might be seen as “foreshadowing.” Not to bring up the whole “friend of a friend” thing, but there’s a theory that everyone in the world is connected by no more than six degrees of separation. This would seem to suggest that we live in a surprisingly small world, but is a “relationship” separated by six degrees really worthy of the name? Can you really say you’re connected to that other person? Can “a

friend of a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend" really constitute some kind of foreshadowing in the tale of your life?

None of this foreshadows anything, of course, *KOYOMIMONOGATARI* being the second installment in the Monogatari Series Final Season. Originally, *OWARIMONOGATARI: End Tale* was going to be second, but this one inserted itself between *TSUKIMONOGATARI* and *OWARIMONOGATARI* because, after so many years and so many books, I'd started to feel like a disconnect had developed between the current story and the beginning of the series, way back in *BAKEMONOGATARI.* I thus conceived the authorial desire to look back over this year in the life of Koyomi Araragi and company and reaffirm the connection. And so this has been *Calendar Tale,* a work that took me one hundred percent by surprise: "Koyomi Stone," "Koyomi Flower," "Koyomi Sand," "Koyomi Water," "Koyomi Wind," "Koyomi Tree," "Koyomi Tea," "Koyomi Mountain," "Koyomi Torus," "Koyomi Seed," "Koyomi Nothing," and "Koyomi Dead."

Since this ended up turning into a short story collection, VOFAN has provided us with a lot of illustrations. I'm very grateful. The final season will continue with *End Tale* and *End Tale (Cont.),* so please stick around. Though who knows, something else might crop up in between, but we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

NISIOISIN

KOYOMIMONOGATARI Part 2

KODANSHA COMICS Digital Edition

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